

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES ETC. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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YOUNG WILD WEST AND "MAVERICK MIKE"; OR, ARIETTA AND THE ROUND UP. *By AN OLD SCOUT.*



As the captured cattle thieves were brought to the front of the tavern, Maverick Mike came out to see what was going on. Wild quickly dismounted, and, with a rawhide whip in his left hand, ran to meet him. Swish! Down went the villain rolling in the dirt.

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Young Wild West and "Maverick Mike"

OR,

ARIETTA AND THE ROUND UP

By AN OLD SCOUT

CHAPTER I.

MAVERICK MIKE MARKS OUT A DEAD LINE.

"There she is, boys! There's ther dead line. I ain't goin' ter allow any one ter ride over that mark till after I leave here! Yer hear what I say? It's Maverick Mike what's talkin', an' when he opens his mouth an' says things he always means what he says. Lame Jack has got a barrel of new rum here, which he's had sent on from ther East. He calls it applejack, an' I allow that it tastes putty good. I've made up my mind ter git blazin' drunk on it, an' that's ther reason I've marked out ther dead line. I'll want ter shoot somebody afore I git through, of course, an' it's a putty sure bet that some galoot will try ter ride over that mark."

The speaker was a tall, raw-boned, muscular man of forty. A close student of the characters of the West would have decided that he had Mexican blood in his veins, for his swarthy complexion and shifty black eyes almost warranted that.

He was attired after the fashion of the average cowboy, and a long-barreled six-shooter hung at each side of his belt.

Taking him all in all, Maverick Mike, as he called himself, was certainly a dangerous-looking customer.

The scene was the single street of the little town in southeastern Colorado called Turner. Across the street, directly from the door of Lame Jack's Roost, which was a typical saloon of the grazing district of the West at the time of which we write.

Maverick Mike had just finished making a mark with the

heel of his boot across the dusty street, and that was what he called the "dead line."

Known to be a "bad man," the majority of the residents of the little town always gave him a wide berth, especially when he took a notion to "stir up things."

Just why he was allowed to go around free might have seemed a mystery to a great many, since he had shot as many as seven men in less than a year, two of them dying from their wounds.

But it might have been because it was always done in what is termed an open fight. Maverick Mike would start the row, and then, being the quicker to fire, got his man every time.

There were perhaps twenty other cowboys in and out of the saloon, their bronchos standing to the long hitching-pole, or near it, for some of them were not tied at all.

These were the horses that had been trained to stand whenever the bridle rein was thrown over their heads.

Almost directly opposite to Lame Jack's Roost was the store, where everything could be bought from a yard of calico to a mowing machine, including provisions, guns, and ammunition.

On this side of the street there were a few of the residents of the town who were taking in the scene with a silent interest.

They all knew the sort of a man Maverick Mike was, and they did not feel like crossing him.

When a crowd of cowboys came in from the outlying ranches they usually stirred up things, anyhow, but they spent their money freely, so it was looked over, even if a few panes of glass got shot out before they went away.

Maverick Mike had received his nickname because he had been very lucky in catching calves that were not branded, thus becoming the owner of them, for no claim can be made of a calf that has never been branded, and found alone on the range.

Such a calf is called a maverick, and hence it will be easy to understand why the "bad" cowboy had come by the nickname.

Maverick Mike had done many queer things while he was in Turner, but this striking a dead line across the street was about the worst yet.

Those who had heard what he said of course might profit by it, but suppose a stranger should ride into the town and cross the mark!

Then lead would fly.

The villain, for such he was beyond the shadow of a doubt, turned and went into Lame Jack's to "liquor up," but the majority of those who had been outside when the dead line was marked out chose to remain there a while.

They all knew that something was going to happen, and they were anxious to see it.

They did not have to wait more than five minutes.

Then a cloud of dust was seen out on the straight trail that ran directly into the street of the little town, a mile away.

"Somebody is comin', I reckon," observed one of the old settlers as he shifted the quid of tobacco in his mouth. "I don't know who it is, but there'll be trouble if they don't stop afore they git ter that mark Maverick made. I can't say as I want ter see any one git hurt this mornin'; but that's what'll happen unless some one goes an' lets them what's comin' know about it."

"Why don't you run around ther back of ther store an' git up there a ways, an' meet 'em, Jake?" asked the storekeeper. "They might be good customers fur me. Run on an' do it, an' I'll treat yer ter a bran'-new plug of tobacker when yer come back."

"All right," and casting an uneasy glance across at the saloon the man sauntered off until he got behind the store.

Then he took out on a run, for he knew he had to hurry if he was going to be able to give the warning without being seen by any of Maverick Mike's friends.

Meanwhile, those watching saw that the riders approaching were both male and female.

This was a little surprising, since there were very few women to come there on horseback.

But as they drew nearer and they saw that they were very young girls—two of them, at least—and were attired in fancy riding costumes, they wondered what it all meant.

There were three females and five males, two of the latter being common, everyday Chinamen.

Of the other three, two were but boys, though full-grown.

They wore fancy hunting suits of buckskin and blue shirts, and one of them had a wealth of light chestnut hair hanging over his shoulders, and with the broad sombrero tipped back upon his head, his face showed up perfect in lines and handsome.

The other boy was good-looking, too, and he had much the appearance of the average boy of the West, accustomed to a life in the open air.

The man of the crowd was tall and straight, with a

bronzed face, long dark hair and mustache, and attired in a style similar to the boys.

On the whole, the members of the little party were about as good-looking and dashing as any the old settlers had ever seen, and they waited patiently for them to halt before crossing the dead line.

The messenger had stopped the strangers, and as they had remained at a halt for a full minute, the watching men knew that they must have been duly warned.

On they came, the handsome boy with the long chestnut hair leading the way, with one of the young girls at his side.

Next came the tall man and the elder of the females, and close behind him were the other boy and girl.

The two Chinamen brought up the rear with two loaded pack-horses trotting along behind them.

It was a picturesque party, to say the least.

The storekeeper looked across at the saloon as they neared it, for he knew that the hoofbeats must have been heard there by this time.

And they had, too. Out came Maverick Mike, and after him came a few toadying friends.

The villainous cowboy stepped out near the center of the street and waved his gun over his head.

"There ain't no one as is goin' ter cross this mark while I'm in town!" he shouted. "Look out, strangers! I'm Maverick Mike, an' I'm bad! I makes my own laws, an' I punish them what don't live up ter 'em. Look out, I say! This here line ain't ter be crossed while I'm in town!"

The approaching strangers must have heard every word he said, but they did not stop one bit.

Instead of doing this the dashing boy, who was mounted on a spirited sorrel stallion, said something to the golden-haired girl at his side, and then both increased their speed to a gallop.

Over the dead line they went, almost before Maverick Mike was aware of it.

The girl went on for about a hundred yards, the rest of the party following her; but the young leader of the party brought the sorrel stallion to a sudden halt, and then swinging around started straight for the bad cowboy.

"Wow!" yelled Maverick Mike. "Did yer see that, boys? They didn't recognize me, I reckon! Now blood has got ter be spilled! Wow! Watch me!"

He swung his revolver around, and there is no doubt but that he meant to shoot the boy without any further delay.

But something happened that changed the programme. Before any of the spectators realized what was going on there was a flash and a report and Maverick Mike dropped his gun as though it had been a hot potato.

The boy on the sorrel stallion had pulled his gun and deliberately shot the weapon from the man's hand.

But the bullet had not touched the hand; it had hit the revolver squarely on the cylinder, and the force of the impact had sent an electric thrill through the villain's arm, causing him to release his grasp upon it.

A cry of amazement went up from several of the cowboys and citizens when they realized what had happened.

Maverick Mike had been turned upon by a mere boy! But worst of all—or best of all, rather—the boy had double discounted him at his own game!

If he had shot him dead they could not have been more

surprised, as what he had done showed how easy he could have sent the bullet through his heart had he so desired.

"I reckon I'll go where I please, you big galoot," said the boy, coolly looking at the astounded ruffian. "You can strike all the lines you want to, but that don't say that we are going to stop from crossing them."

As the speaker slipped down from the back of his horse his male companions came riding up.

"Want any help, Wild?" asked the tall man with the dark hair and mustache.

"No, Charlie," was the reply. "I reckon I can take care of the galoot, all right. He is only a big bluffer. I'll just show him that he has barked up the wrong tree, and then we'll go over to the store and make our purchases."

The boy spoke in such a cool and easy way that the bystanders became convinced that he was out of the ordinary run of boys.

Anyhow, they had never seen such a cool one, old or young, before in their whole lives.

"Pick up your gun, you big bluffer!"

The command came from the handsome young fellow in a voice that showed he meant business.

Maverick Mike cast an uneasy glance around him.

He knew that there were mighty few men there who had any particular love for him, so it was no use for him to look for any sympathy.

He walked over to where the revolver had dropped and stooped to pick it up.

Crack!

The boy in the fancy buckskin hunting suit fired again just as the bad man lifted the weapon from the ground.

The result was that he dropped it again.

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND HIS FRIENDS.

With unerring aim the handsome boy had hit the weapon again, sending it from Maverick Mike's hand.

"Pick it up!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Yer—yer won't let me," came the reply. "If yer don't shoot ag'in I'll do it."

Crack!

This time the boy fired at the weapon as it lay on the ground, turning it over as the bullet struck it.

The bad cowboy was not what might be termed a coward; he knew when he had the worst of it, and he was simply trying to get out of the trouble he had got himself in.

He had another revolver, but he had made no move to draw it.

Probably this was because he knew that the boy was quicker than he was.

"Now, then," said the dashing young fellow, "I reckon you can wipe out that mark you made across the road."

He pointed to the so-called dead line, and the bad man understood.

He made a move to do as he had been told, and then the boy called out:

"Hold on! You had better pick up your gun. You

might need it, you know. I won't knock it out of your hand this time."

Maverick Mike slowly made his way to where the weapon lay.

Very gingerly he picked it up and thrust it into the holster.

Then, while the cowboys and citizens looked on with no little amusement, he scraped out the mark he had made across the street, covering it with the dust that was so plentiful.

This done, he came back and paused before the dashing young deadshot.

"I reckon that will be about all," came from the boy. "Now, take my advice and don't try anything like that again, Maverick Mike. You might not get off so easily next time."

"Say!" said the villain, who had now fully recovered himself, though there was no doubt that he feared the boy greatly, and did not mean to do a thing to cross him, "I'd jest like ter know who you are, young feller."

"Well, if it will make you feel better I'll tell you, then. I go by the handle of Young Wild West. It's the only name I've got, and I intend to stick to it. How does that strike you?"

"Young Wild West, eh? Well, you must be ther champion deadshot of ther West, then?"

"That is what some call me, though I never speak of myself as being the champion deadshot of the West. I can't help it if they want to call me that, you know."

"An' you're putty well known as ther Prince of ther Saddle, too, I reckon," went on Maverick Mike with a nod of his head.

"Yes, that's a sort of nickname I received one time. But that don't make me the prince of the saddle, though."

"Down in Texas they call yer ther Lasso King, too, don't they?"

"Well, I reckon there were a few cowboys down there who gave me that name once," the boy answered, smiling at his questioner.

Maverick Mike was now quite cool. The surprise he had received had been the means of sobering him a great deal, and he now appeared to be quite at his ease.

"Your two pard, Cheyenne Charlie an' Jim Dart, is here, too?" he went on questioningly as he looked at the man and the boy, who sat on their horses close by.

"That's right," Young Wild West answered. "I reckon you know all about us. It seems that way, anyhow."

"Well, I've heard a whole lot about yer, anyhow. But I never seen yer afore. If I'd known it was you when yer came ridin' up ther street I'll bet you would never have got over ther dead line. I would have winged yer afore yer got to it. That's ther kind of a hairpin I am! I am Maverick Mike, an' I never furgits a wrong what's done me, Young Wild West. You've got all ther best of it now; but my day will come, see if it don't! You've made me look like a monkey right afore ther whole crowd here, an' that don't set very good on my stomach. You had me in just about ther same fix as ther teacher had me in school once. She ketched me with a chew of tobacco in my mouth, an' she pinned me so hard that I swallered ther chew. I had ter swaller ther chew jest now, fur when yer shot my gun from

out of my hand I knowed there was no use. I jest made ther best of it."

There was an amused smile on the handsome face of the boy.

"You are quite a philosopher, I see," he observed. "But if you take my advice you'll keep that chew of tobacco down. If you try to raise it and spit it out you might have to swallow a dose of hot lead. I mean what I say!"

"All right, Young Wild West. I've got ter take my chances on that, of course."

"I just said 'that would be about all,' but I will add something. It is this: Don't make too many threats. You ought to know very well that I don't care any more for you than I do for a lame coyote. I have never been scared yet by a bluffing bad man, and I am sure that I am not going to begin now. If I find you are looking for my life I will shoot you down like a cur! Now just remember that!"

Maverick Mike muttered something that was unintelligible, and turning, went into Lame Jack's Roost.

Then the dashing young deadshot took his horse by the bridle and led him across to the store.

It was a pleasant morning in early spring. The buds were beginning to show on the trees and shrubs that were plentiful in the little town, and the birds were singing sweetly.

The air was balmy and warm, for after a rather severe winter the weather had settled down to make a model spring, so it seemed.

The time of which we are writing was a few years ago, when things were in a much wilder state in that portion of Colorado than now, and law and order in some spots were almost entirely unknown.

There are places out that way even now where such a state of affairs exists, and when a skeptical person makes the statement that there is no longer a "Wild West" it simply goes to show that he has never been there, and does not know what he is talking about.

But to our story.

What Maverick Mike had said of Young Wild West was exactly right.

The boy had been a sure shot with rifle and revolver ever since he was ten years of age, and constant practice had made him a wonder at the game.

Fearless and remarkably cool under any circumstances, and with a determination to always do right, he had made a name for himself during the few short years of his existence that many a man old enough to be his grandfather would have been proud to own.

But it is only now and then that we come across such a character as the boy was, and having found in him the true ideal American boy, with a record of daring that could hardly be equaled, and the hero of a string of thrilling adventures that could hardly be surpassed, we have to simply write about him.

Cheyenne Charlie, the tall man with long dark hair and mustache, was an ex-government scout, who had been born and reared in Wyoming, taking his name from what was then but a town composed principally of shanties and tents, but which now is a city well known throughout the country.

Jim Dart, the boy, was a thorough Westerner, too, and though he never had a great deal to say he was always ready, whether it was "fun" or "fight" that was on hand.

Both he and Cheyenne Charlie loved the dashing young deadshot as though he were a brother, and finding in him a born leader, they were proud to follow him and be called his partners.

All three were well supplied in the way of money, since they had been very successful in their mining ventures, and they had drifted into the way of traveling about the wildest parts of the West just for the purpose of looking for fortune and adventure.

It was the same way with the girls, since they had been in the habit of going with them. Cheyenne Charlie's wife, Anna, was never better satisfied than she was when she was with her husband, and Arietta Murdock and Eloise Gardner, the sweethearts of Young Wild West and Jim Dart, were just about the same in this respect.

Of the three, Arietta was the only one who was a real Western girl.

She had been brought up to handle a gun and ride a horse, and she could do both as well as the average man of the border.

She had the nerve, too, and what she had learned from her dashing young lover made her an exception to the average of her sex.

But the others could shoot straight and ride well, too, so they suffered no inconvenience in going about from place to place and living in camp the greater part of the time.

It had become a sort of second nature to all of them, in fact, and they would much rather put up in camp than take quarters in the taverns they came across in their travels.

As we find them they were on their way to a mining district in New Mexico, but had met a cowboy who told them there was a little town close, and had come there for the purpose of stocking up with some provisions they needed.

When the man the storekeeper had sent to warn them about the dead line that Maverick Mike had drawn across the street halted them, Wild, as our hero was called, had thanked him laughingly, and then assured him that they would ride right over it.

And they had, too, with the result that has just been told.

No wonder, then, that they were given a hearty reception by the proprietor of the store and those gathered there when they crossed the street.

"Great mowin'-machines!" exclaimed the storekeeper as he seized the hand of the champion deadshot of the West and shook it in hearty fashion, "that was ther greatest thing I ever seen, my boy! So you're Young Wild West, eh?"

"Yes, that's right, boss," Wild replied. "I reckon that galoot had you fellows pretty well scared of him. He's a bad man, no doubt, but there's always a way to tame such fellows. All you have to do is to go about it in the right way, you know."

"Yes, but there ain't any one as I've ever seen who knowed how ter go about it ther right way, though. Maverick Mike has always been a mighty soon sort of a chap."

"Maybe he is yet. But that don't say that he is going to get the best of an argument every time. But, say, boss, I reckon we want to make a few purchases. If you don't object we'll attend to it right away. We don't intend to stay here very long, you know."

"All right, Young Wild West. Come right in. I'll see

that yer git what yer want. I keep 'most everything needful here."

Wild had already reached the door, so he went on in, followed by the proprietor.

The girls dismounted and came in, too, just to give their horses a chance to rest up a little.

There was nothing to keep them in Turner, so Wild had remarked when they came in sight of it that they had better go right on to the south as soon as they got what they wanted.

The trouble with Maverick Mike was regarded merely as a passing incident by them, for they were well used to such things.

Bad men were as thick as fleas on a dog, so to speak, and they were never surprised at meeting one.

As soon as they had stocked up with what they needed our friends mounted to ride away.

"Good-by!" said the storekeeper. "I hope ter see yer around ag'in afore long."

"Oh, we may come around this way again," our hero answered. "Good-by!"

"Three cheers fur Young Wild West!" shouted the man who had run ahead to warn them of the dead line.

The whole crowd joined him, and the air rang with their cheering.

This brought out those who were in Lame Jack's Roost. Maverick Mike only came as far as the door, however.

He waited until our friends had got about a hundred feet past the saloon, and then he called out:

"We'll meet ag'in, Young Wild West! Look out when we do! I'm a mighty bad man, an' I never furgits a wrong!"

"All right," shouted the boy in answer. "I reckon you'll find me ready for you. But you had better make all arrangements with the undertaker before you come after me. It might be a good idea to make your will, too, if you've got anything besides a bad name to leave."

Then our friends rode on, and the little prairie town was soon left behind them.

"We'll keep right ahead until noon, and then we'll go into camp," said Wild. "It might be that we will strike a ranch before that, however, as there must be some lying out around the town. If we do we will have dinner there, providing we are welcome. We will pay for what we get, and that will save the grub we've got for the wild, uninhabited stretch we have got to travel later on."

"That's right, Wild," Arietta answered. "I like eating at a ranch. It beats a tavern all to pieces as a rule."

Two hours later they came in sight of a well equipped ranch, and they promptly headed for it.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE "STRAIGHT DEAL" RANCH.

"I reckon that's a pretty good sort of a ranch," Young Wild West remarked as they rapidly neared the house and other buildings. "They haven't made the spring round-up yet, either; that's easy to see by the looks of the corral."

"That's right, Wild," Cheyenne Charlie answered.

"There's a big bunch of cows an' calves over there ter ther left, too. An' look at ther yearlin's back there!"

He pointed out as he spoke and they all saw that he was right.

But few old cattle could be seen, which showed that the owner of the ranch had done considerable shipping during the winter.

The big corral had but a few scattering ones in it, and that was why Wild had called attention to it.

The buildings were in first-class order, as far as they could see, and there was a sort of neatness about everything that was bound to give the impression that the ranch was well managed.

No cowboys could be seen anywhere, so it was easy to guess that they were at the little town, probably for the purpose of having a little spree before the strenuous work of rounding up the stock and branding the calves began.

In a few minutes our friends were very close to the ranch house, and then it was not long before a woman appeared on the porch.

She waved a welcome to them with her apron, and the girls promptly responded by waving their hands.

"We're welcome, all right," said Arietta. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred strangers will find a welcome at a cattle ranch. That is one reason why I am proud of the West. We have as good people living in it as can be found the world ower."

"Yes, an' some of ther worst, too," the scout spoke up. "If it wasn't fur ther bad ones there wouldn't be much use in livin' out here, though. Then all ther excitement we could git would be from huntin' bears an' shootin' at cata-mounds an' wildcats. We'd soon git tired of that, I reckon."

"Well, you would, that's sure, though I know you like to get on the trail of a grizzly pretty well."

"Yes, I like ter git after any kind of a bear. But too much of it would be no good."

"Too much of one thing is no good, anyhow, Charlie," spoke up our hero. "But, come on! We'll see whose ranch this is, and whether the woman cares to furnish us with something to eat or not. By the way she acts I reckon she'll be only too glad to."

"I know she will, Wild," Arietta hastened to say.

They were soon to find out all about it, for a couple of minutes later they were at a halt before the porch.

"Good-mornin', strangers!" called out the woman, who must have been somewhere around the age of forty, her face lighted with a smile. "Want somethin' to eat, I reckon. Well, you've come to the right place. I'm always glad to see strangers, 'specially them of my own sex. Jump off, young ladies, an' let the boys put the horses away. They'll find plenty of empty stalls over in the stable, 'cause 'most everybody is away from home just now."

The girls promptly dismounted, and when she had kissed all three of them the woman seemed happier than ever.

"This is the Straight Deal Ranch," she went on to say, turning to Wild and his partners. "That's ther name my husband give it four years ago, when we located here. He's great on givin' names, he is. But he believes in a straight deal, every time, an' that's why he named it that."

"A mighty good name, too, I reckon," answered Wild. "Well, since you seem satisfied to get dinner for us, I reckon we'll put the horses away for an hour or two."

"Oh, you ain't goin' to git away as quick as that. There's goin' to be some doin's here to-night, an' you've got to stay. My daughter Maggie is comin' home to-day. She's been up in Denver for four months, gittin' up a little education in music an' sich. Her dad bought her a new piano, which only got here yesterday, an' there's goin' to be a surprise party here for her to-night. I expect none of us will hardly know her when she comes, for she wrote an' said she had got to be a regular city gal now. It's cost her dad a pile ter put her through; but he don't mind that. He's been mighty lucky in ther last two years, 'cept that he's kept losin' a lot of calves all ther time. But he's made considerable money, anyhow, an' he don't mind spendin' some of it ter give his daughter an education."

The ranchman's wife certainly was not wanting for words, and the way she rattled it off showed how well she liked to talk.

She quickly informed them that her husband's name was Morris Oaks, and that her own name was Lavinia. She had not been to anything that might be called a city in nearly nine years; and she was satisfied to live on the ranch so long as she had everything she wanted, which was the case now.

Maggie, her eighteen-year-old daughter, had a desire to learn music and the "lingo" of city folks, so they had sent her to Denver to study at a "cemetery" for girls, she said.

The girls smiled, but did not let her know why.

But of course they would stay to the surprise party, since she gave them such a pressing invitation.

Arietta assured her of this without asking Wild what he thought about it.

The young deadshot smiled, and then he led the way to the barn, he leading his own and his sweetheart's horse.

Charlie and Jim came after him, each with two horses, and Hop and Wing followed, as a matter of course.

They found a convenient place to put their camping outfit and supplies, as well as good stalls for the horses, and in ten minutes they were ready to return to the house.

As they walked back they saw a buckboard coming down the trail that led past the house, and when they took a look and saw there were a middle-aged man and a young lady in it they could easily guess that it was the ranchman fetching his daughter, who had been sent to Denver to become "cified," home.

"I reckon we'll have some fun out of this, Wild," remarked the scout, shrugging his shoulders. "It's a good thing we come this way."

"Lat light, Misler Charlie," said Hop with a grin on his yellow face. "We havee lille fun, allee light."

"Oh, you kin always manage ter have fun anywhere yer go, you heathen galoot," was the reply. "But yer had better be careful around here. Don't try ter work none of your skin gamblin' games. Maybe they won't go, yer know."

"Allee light, Misler Charlie; me no workee, so be. Me be velly goodee Chinee, so be."

Wild said nothing.

He knew that the clever Chinaman would lose no chance to get into a game of draw poker with the first one he could get to play with him.

But he did not mean that he should keep the money if he won any.

Hop had a bad failing.

His sleight-of-hand abilities enabled him to do about as he liked with a pack of cards, and it was so easy for him to cheat in a game of poker that he could not resist the temptation.

When he won money from those who played honestly our hero always made it a point to make him return it.

But when he got in a game with card sharps, who were simply playing unfair for the purpose of fleecing him, it was different.

The card sharps usually got what was coming to them, and a little more, too.

They all returned to the house and found Mrs. Oaks still talking like a steamboat.

She was certainly wound up, and as it was the first time in a week or two that she had got the chance to converse with any one of her own sex, she was making up for lost time.

The girls could only get in a word now and then, and Anna was a pretty good conversationalist, too.

By the time Wild and his partners entered the house they knew pretty much everything about the family.

But they all wanted to see Maggie.

Wild stopped the conversation when he called out to the woman that he guessed she was coming with her father.

Mrs. Oaks gave a cry of delight and ran out to have a look.

When she saw the buckboard coming, the two horses hitched to it on a run, she fairly danced with joy.

"It's her!" she cried, clapping her hands. "It's my own Maggie. Jest look at that hat she's got on! My, but ain't she some punkins now! I'll bet she's cified now! Not a word about the piano, now! We don't want her to see it until she gets all her things off!"

"We won't say a word, Mrs. Oaks," Arietta declared.

There was a waving of hands before the buckboard finally pulled up before the door, and then came the meeting of mother and daughter.

This over with, Mrs. Oaks quickly introduced the guests she had, then there was plenty of handshaking and kissing among the girls.

The ranchman was delighted to meet Young Wild West and his friends, and he declared that they must stay over night, anyhow.

"You're welcome ter stay longer," he added. "But I wouldn't think of lettin' yer go away afore."

Then he got a chance to whisper in Wild's ear that there was going to be a surprise party at the ranch that night in honor of his daughter's arrival from Denver, and advised them not to say anything about it.

But he was quickly assured that they knew all about that, and that the girl would not hear of it from them.

Maggie proved to be a very nice girl, though she evidently felt that her stay in Denver at the "cemetery" had elevated her considerably.

She used what Cheyenne Charlie called rather "high-falutin' language," too, but the girls were not puzzled any by it, since all of them had had a fair schooling.

CHAPTER IV.

HOP PLAYS A JOKE.

The dinner our friends had at the ranch was certainly one that spoke well for the hostess.

Probably they would not have got such a variety of it had she not been expecting her daughter to arrive.

The two Chinamen were taken to the kitchen to eat with the old half-breed Mexican woman who assisted the mistress of the house with the work that had to be done, and her husband, who was a negro, as black as the ace of spades, so he declared himself whenever the subject came up.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sambo White," said Mrs. Oaks, when she conducted Hop and Wing to the kitchen to partake of the feast. "I hope you two will get along well with the servants of Young Wild West and his friends. They are nothin' but heathen Chinese, I know; but they seem to be nice quiet people."

Hop and Wing bowed low to the oddly-mated old couple, and this was sufficient to make a good impression upon them right at the start.

"Me likee nicee blackee man, so be," said Hop, and he again bowed, this time lower than before. "Me likee pleddy woman, too. She lookee allee samee likee um plincess in China."

The double compliment seemed to be meant, so they both took it that way.

The two Celestials sat down at the table in the kitchen and the mistress retired.

The servants had the same to eat as the guests did, and they made the best of it, as might be imagined.

Hop and Wing both had good appetites, there was no mistake about that.

They sat down at the table just as though they belonged to the family, too, for Wing followed the example of his brother and took things very easy.

"Help yourselves," said the woman. "Plenty good to eat."

"Allee light," answered Hop, and he proceeded to do so.

Roast chicken was the leading thing on the bill of fare, and when Hop took a whole one on his plate the darky and his wife looked dismayed.

There were but two of them there, and that was probably the reason.

But when he jabbed a fork in the remaining one and placed it on the plate of Wing they felt like dropping to the floor.

But before they could recover themselves he picked up the big dish of mashed potatoes and emptied it on his own plate and that of his brother.

The gravy bowl was treated the same way, and then Hop began eating his chicken as though he had not a moment to spare.

"Whattee mattee?" he asked between mouthfuls, looking at the old couple in surprise.

"Yo' done take all de chicken, an' de gravy, an' de taters," the darky answered. "Wha' fo' yo' do dat?"

"Me likee chicken velly muchee," was the reply. "My blother allee samee likee chicken, too, so be."

But Wing quickly put back the chicken and potatoes, and looking at the couple said:

"My blother allee samee clazy. You no mindee. Hully uppee and eatee, so be."

Then the half-breed woman got her knife and fork at work and began carving the chicken, while Hop kept on eating his, smiling in his cheerful way.

He cut off all the white meat and pulled off the legs, and then he opened the chicken and pulled out some of the dressing.

This done, he pulled a firecracker from his pocket, and, unobserved, thrust it inside the chicken.

Hop made his own firecrackers, as well as other fireworks, for whenever he got to a city where such things were sold he always made it a point to stock up with gunpowder and other explosives, to be used as he saw fit.

The cracker in the chicken, he turned his attention to what he had cut from the carcass and filled himself.

There was pudding, too, on the table, and after drinking two cups of coffee he polished off the pudding.

Then he swallowed another cup of coffee to wash it down, and lighted a cigar.

The others were not half done yet, but that made no difference to the clever Chinaman.

He meant to end the meal rather abruptly, and as well as Wing knew his way, he had no suspicion of anything just then.

He gnawed away at the chicken wing he had been allotted, along with the rest, by the old woman, and was thoroughly enjoying the meal.

Hop smiled at them, and then he coolly leaned over and touched the lighted end of his cigar to the fuse which was protruding from the opening where the dressing had been stowed.

"Me gittee 'nother cuppee coffee, so be," he said as he took his cup and arose, going toward the stove where the pot sat boiling.

Just then there was a sharp hissing sound.

Wing gave a start, for he knew that something was wrong.

Bang!

The cracker exploded, bursting open the chicken and sending the dressing and parts of it all around the room.

The darky and his wife fell over backward, nearly upsetting the table, both letting out yells that could have been heard half a mile.

Wing got up and ran out of the house, for he expected that something worse would happen, and he did not care to be present.

As he realized the terrible muss he had made Hop started after his brother, and he succeeded in getting out of the kitchen just as Wild and the ranchman came rushing in to find out what the trouble was.

The frightened old couple tried to explain, but it was hardly necessary, for the bespattered walls and general condition of the room told the tale.

"I reckon Hop has been playing a joke, Mr. Oaks," said our hero. "I'll find him and make it warm for him. He has gone altogether too far."

"Playin' a joke, yer say?" gasped the ranchman. "One of them foolish-lookin' Chinamen play a joke! Why, if I

thought that's what done all this I'd give him a five-dollar bill, blamed if I wouldn't!"

"He's gone an' blowed up one of ther roasted chickens, that's what he's done," spoke up Cheyenne Charlie as he pushed his way into the room and looked it over. "Ther galoot put a firecracker inside of one an' then set it off. It's just like him. Look at ther stuffin' of ther bird! It's plastered all over ther wall!"

"An' some done hit me in de eye, too!" spoke up the darky. "Dat am surely a drefful Chinee. He done eat like a pig, an' den he done make one of de chickens bust an' fly all over de room!"

The ranchman broke into a laugh.

"Say," he exclaimed as he turned to Wild, "I'd have ter laugh if ther whole house was in ruins! But who would ever think that a Chinee would know enough ter play a joke like that? Where is he? I want ter make him a present of five dollars."

"And I want to make him a present of a good kicking," added our hero. "He has gone altogether too far."

"I'll git ther heathen galoot," said the scout, and outside he went on a run.

He found Hop a short distance from the house.

He was calmly smoking his cigar, just as though nothing had happened.

"Come here, yer yaller galoot!" roared Charlie. "I reckon you're goin' ter git it now! Wild wants yer."

"My blother allee samee puttee fireclacker in um chickee," explained Wing as he came around an outbuilding and showed himself just then. "He velly muchee bad Chinee, Misler Charlie."

"Me velly muchee solly, Misler Charlie," said Hop humbly. "Me no tlink me makee so muchee dirt; me allee samee cleanee uppee; me goodee Chinee, so be."

Charlie caught him just then, and he began kicking him toward the kitchen.

But the ranchman ran out and stopped him.

He pushed the scout aside and took Hop by the arm.

"You come with me an' tell me all about it. By gracious! but I wish I had been there to see that! Ha! ha! ha!"

Our friends were not a little surprised at the way Oaks acted.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have been about angry enough to half kill the Chinaman for playing such a trick.

When the cracker had exploded it scattered a muss about the room that would take some time to clean up.

Wild saw that the ranchman was earnest in what he said, so he let him have his way.

Hop was conducted to a little room that adjoined the dining-room, and then he was treated to a glass of liquor from the ranchman's private stock.

Then he was asked to tell about it, and he did so in his own peculiar way.

Oaks laughed heartily all the way through the recital.

"Here's five dollars fur yer," he said when the Chinaman had finished. "I reckon it's worth it. Ther darky an' his wife deserves a little shakin' up once in while, an' I reckon this has done 'em good. But, great ginger! I wish I had been there."

Hop did not know exactly what to make of this kind of

treatment; but he knew the ranchman was pleased, so that made him feel easy.

He got on the best of terms with him, and they both drank from the bottle frequently during the conversation that ensued.

Hop told a great deal about himself, and Oaks was pleased to know that he had such a smart Chinee under his roof, so he declared.

When they finally came out of the room they found that the muss in the kitchen was about cleaned up. Then Hop felt easier still.

CHAPTER V.

GETTING READY FOR THE BLOW-OUT.

We will now go back to Lame Jack's Roost, at Turner, and find out how Maverick Mike was getting on.

The rascally cowboy kept himself pretty quiet until after Young Wild West and his friends had been gone about half an hour.

Then he took two or three drinks of liquor in quick succession and went out to shoot up the town.

It was evident that he must have satisfaction some way, and since he had been afraid to try and get it out of the dashing young deadshot, some one else would have to suffer.

There were not more than four men there whom he could call his friends.

Even they feared more than they liked him.

But it was good policy to keep on the right side of Maverick, as they called him, and they spent their money to do it.

"Yer see, it's this way," explained Dick Mooney, the foreman of the Straight Deal Ranch, who was one of the bunch of cowboys at the Roost when Young Wild West called Maverick Mike and took the starch out of him: "Maverick has got bad ways, but he's a mighty good man on ther range. We have ter sorter look over his shortcomin's, yer know. Ther boss wants ter start ther round-up ther day after to-morrer, an' as there's ter be a big blow-out at ther ranch to-night, an' we're all ter be there, it ain't hardly right that we should git in trouble with Maverick. He'll get b'ilin' drunk to-day, of course; an' most likely he'll do considerable damage. But we want ter try an' keep him from killin' any one, 'cause we don't want ther blow-out sp'iled. It's goin' ter be a big affair. Boss Oaks never does things by halves, yer know."

"Oh, I know that," Lame Jack replied. "I know Morris Oaks about as well as any one in Turner, I reckon. Wasn't he ther man what loaned me ther money ter open this place? Why shouldn't I know him putty well? Why, I've got an invitation ter ther blow-out, which is ter be give in honor of his darter Maggie's arrival from Denver. I'm goin', too. Six o'clock I'm goin' ter shut up ther place, an' me an' my wife is goin' over in ther buckboard. We'll git there in a little over two hours. I wouldn't miss it fur a good deal. Morris Oaks knowed I was lame, an' couldn't do much in ther way of makin' a livin', outside of keepin' a store, so he offered ter lend me ther money ter start up a first-class whisky-mill. Yer know how it was afore I opened. Yer had ter buy your whisky at ther store across ther street.

But it wasn't whisky. It was benzine an' water flavored with molasses an' teched up with a little laudanum or somethin'. I've been sellin' straight goods, I have. An' I've done quite a business. I paid Morris Oaks back his money, of course, but I've got a warm spot in my heart fur him, an' always will have. I wouldn't miss goin' ter ther blow-out to-night, not fur anything."

"None of us is goin' ter miss it, Jack. I s'pose Maverick will be there, an' he'll be togged in his fancy Mexican rig. Yer know he was sorter sweet on Maggie Oaks afore she went away ter Denver ter git an eddication, an' it ain't likely that he's lost ther feelin'. I don't know as ther boss would be willin' ter let Maggie have him if she wanted him. But it ain't likely that she does want him, though. If she's gone an' got citified, as her mother wanted her ter, it ain't likely she's goin' ter take up with no cowboy, especially sich a wild feller as Maverick is."

"No, that's right. I hope Maverick won't raise no ruction here afore we start. He'll take a sleep an' will be putty well sobered up by ther time he gits back to ther ranch. It ain't likely he'll do any cuttin' up there, 'cause he seems ter have a good deal of respect fur ther boss."

"Yes, I reckon so. But he don't have much respect fur you, not when he's away from work, Dick."

"That's right. But what am I goin' ter do?" and the foreman shrugged his shoulders. "Maverick is a mighty good hand, but he's a bad man when he gits a little drink in him, an' then he don't care fur nobody."

"Well, he more'n met his match this mornin', I reckon. Young Wild West sartinly made him drop down a couple of pegs. My! There he comes now! He's sartinly lettin' himself out!"

Yells and shots could be heard out on the street, and the clatter of hoofs told that the bad man was letting himself out.

He rode right into the saloon this time, for the doorway was amply large enough to permit it, providing he stooped a little.

"Set 'em up, Jack!" he cried, flourishing his revolver. "It's on you this time. I'm a bad man, I am! I don't care fur nothin'!"

"All right, Maverick," Lame Jack answered. "It's my turn, I know. Come on, boys; we're goin' ter drink ter my health."

"Ye're goin' ter drink ter my health, yer mean," corrected Maverick Mike. "Don't make no mistake about that, boys. I want ter git in trim fur to-night, yer know. Ther gal what I thinks a whole lot of is comin' back to-day, an' I expect ter meet her to-night. I want ter see if she's turned me down fur some one she's seen up in Denver. Ha! ha! ha!"

They all knew whom he referred to. The most of the cowboys there belonged on the Straight Deal Ranch, and they all knew of the big time that was due to be had that night.

They even knew that the boss had bought a piano for his daughter, and that he was going to try and fix it so she would not see it before the guests arrived.

Maverick Mike swallowed his drink and then he forced his horse to trot around the room, upsetting the chairs that were in the way.

But no one tried to stop him. Though the cowboys were

all brave fellows, they did not want to go against the man, who when sober was a good fellow.

And so he had his own way, and when he got tired of staying in the saloon he went outside and did some more shooting and yelling.

But when noon came he was about done for, and with his horse standing outside Maverick Mike sought a chair in the corner and went to sleep.

Much relieved, the other cowboys amused themselves in their own fashion, and when night came and Lame Jack announced that he was going to close his place they went out orderly.

Maverick awoke and quietly went out, too. He was quite sober now, and with an approving nod he remarked that he was going home to tog himself out for the blow-out.

CHAPTER VI.

WILD SHOWS MAGGIE HOW HE CAN SHOOT.

Ranchman Oaks had seen to it that the piano he had bought for his daughter was placed in the store-room, where she would not be apt to go, and the dinner was eaten without the girl knowing about it.

Both her parents were anxious to keep her from knowing of it until the guests arrived that night, but if she should find it out they would not care so much.

The practical joke Hop had played in the kitchen, making his brother and the old darky and his wife the victims of it, put every one in a good humor except the victims.

But Wild gave the clever Chinaman a sharp lecture, just the same, for he knew that it was altogether too much of a joke.

But when the kitchen had been cleaned and after his victims had been given an extra supply of eatables, there was nothing but smiling faces when it was brought up, which was frequently the case during the afternoon.

Meanwhile the girls had got pretty well acquainted with Maggie.

They found her to be a girl with "ideas," so to speak.

She had a notion that she was away ahead of the ordinary ranch girls, and was inclined to the belief that she was very handsome and accomplished.

But when she had heard of some of the adventures the girls had passed through, especially Arietta, she showed the greatest respect for them.

"I am going to tell you a secret," she said to them along toward the close of the afternoon. "There is going to be a guest here to-night, who is not expected by either mother or father. He is my affianced husband, and he is a rising young lawyer of Denver. His name is Frank Belter, and—oh! he is just splendid. I knew there would be a party gotten up to celebrate my arrival—though they don't think I know anything about it—and I thought I would give them a little surprise of my own. It is arranged so that Frank will arrive here some time between eight and nine. He will be here, unless something happens, that is sure. Now, don't say a word about it."

"Certainly we won't say anything about it," Arietta an-

swered. "I am sure we are not the kind to do that. You have told us a secret, and we will keep it."

"I did expect to see a piano here when I came, but I suppose dad never thought about it. He was anxious for me to study music, and now that I have put in four months at it, and can play 'Home, Sweet Home,' 'Yankee Doodle,' and a few other pieces, I haven't anything to play upon. But I haven't given up hopes yet. Maybe the piano will come."

"It might," said Anna, smiling at the remarks of the girl, for she could play quite well herself, having put in three or four years at it before she came West.

What she was smiling at was because Maggie said she had put in four months at it.

She well knew that very little about music could be learned in that time.

But she was not going to tell the girl that the piano she was longing for was in the store-room of the ranch house.

However, the girls now knew that it was little in the way of a surprise that Maggie would receive.

After a while the ranch girl proposed that they go out for a ride.

"I haven't forgot how to saddle and mount a broncho if I have been at a young ladies' seminary so long," she said smilingly. "I don't intend to give up my horse, even after I am married to Frank. Come on. I suppose you are all great with horses. You have spent so much of your time riding about the country."

The proposition just suited the girls, so they went out with her.

They found Wild and his partners near the corral, looking at some of the stock with the ranchman.

They were at once invited to take a ride, and they all accepted.

In a few minutes they were mounted and speeding over the prairie.

Maggie took pains to show her skill, and she proved to be an excellent rider.

But she scarcely had the grace of Arietta, who had learned to ride in the saddle when she was scarcely eight years of age, and since that time had become able to master the most vicious bronchos.

As they were coming back, after making a circle about the grazing grounds, Maggie rode up alongside of our hero and said:

"You are the champion deadshot of the West, Mr. West. Mother told me that soon after you were introduced to me. Suppose you show me how to shoot?"

"I reckon you know how to shoot, all right, Miss Oaks," Wild answered with a smile. "It would hardly be necessary for me to attempt to show a girl who has been reared on a ranch."

"Oh, of course I know how to fire a gun," was the reply. "But I am not an accurate shot. You are, I understand. By accurate I mean to say that you seldom or never miss what you shoot at."

"Well, that is the way to be. When you fire at anything you must always be sure that you have the object covered before pulling the trigger. If one always does that the shot will be bound to be made. Some take too long a time in getting aim, and that means a miss oftener than a hit. I'll take a shot at something if you will tell what."

"Well, there are three crows flying over there. Can you hit one of them?"

"I'll try."

The girl seemed surprised when she received the ready answer, for the crows she spoke of were such a distance away that they looked small.

But they were no more than a quarter of a mile, for all that, and Wild had been known to bring down a hawk at half a mile.

He had brought his rifle with him, as he usually did when he went out, for there was never telling just when he might run across an enemy.

Unslinging the rifle he took a quick, sure aim at one of the crows, which were flying steadily, and pressed the trigger.

Crang!

As the sharp report rang out one of the carrion birds tumbled over and then went shooting toward the ground.

"I reckon I hit him, all right," said the young deadshot coolly. "That is a pretty good distance to wing a crow, too. But if your rifle is true, and your hands steady, it can be done every time. Anything else you would like to see done, Miss Oaks?"

"Yes, I would like to see you hit something with a revolver. Let me see. What will you shoot at?"

Wild quickly drew a silver dollar from his pocket.

"Here," he said quickly as he handed the coin to her. "Ride ahead of me, and when you get ready just throw it as high as you can. I'll try and hit it for you."

"Oh, my! Can you do it?" she cried, more surprised than ever.

"Well, I'll try, anyhow."

"I almost believe you can do it."

"Go ahead and try me."

Maggie looked the dollar over as though she wanted to make sure that there were no bullet marks on it, and then she started her horse at a gallop across the range.

Wild rode behind her at a distance of about twenty feet, the rest following closely.

The girl knew how to throw, and she let the silver coin go high in the air.

It flashed and sparkled in the sunlight, and all could see it.

Our hero's partners and the girls were unconcerned, but Maggie and her father looked eager and expectant.

Suddenly Wild whipped out one of his revolvers.

Crack!

As the report rang out the coin took a jump and went spinning off in a different direction.

Every one knew it had been hit, and a cry went up from the ranchman.

"Jest look at that!" he said excitedly. "There ain't a man on ther ranch what could do that. Even Maverick Mike couldn't!"

"What's that?" asked Wild as he swung his horse around and rode back. "Did you mention the name of Maverick Mike?"

"Why, yes," replied the ranchman. "Do you know him?"

"I reckon I do; and he knows me, too. Does he work for you, Mr. Oaks?"

"Why, yes. Maverick is a pretty good man, too. He's got a bad failin', they say, though. When he gets whisky

in him he's putty rough in his ways. But, take him sober, he's a good one. Dick Mooney, my foreman, says that himself."

"Well, I had a little trouble with Maverick Mike, as you call him, over in Turner. I suppose he has it in for me good and strong. He told me so, in fact."

"He did, eh? Did he shoot at yer?"

"No, not as bad as that. I didn't let him, you see."

"Well, by gracious! I hope you an' Maverick don't come together to-night. He might shoot yer. As I said afore, he's mighty bad when he's been drinkin'."

"Well, he had better be careful, dad," spoke up Maggie. "I don't like Maverick, anyhow, though I always treated him right. But if he starts to make trouble here to-night I hope he gets his medicine, that's all!"

The girl seemed to have forgotten her "citizefied" ways, and she was talking as a ranch girl again.

"Don't worry," said Wide coolly. "I reckon he won't make much of a disturbance. I'll be on the watch for him, and since he belongs on the ranch I won't kill him, either. I'll just make him behave himself; you can bet on that!"

Charlie went and got the silver dollar, and after they all had a look at the bullet mark on it they rode back to the ranch.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PIANO.

Hop Wah remained very quiet the rest of the afternoon. The truth was that he felt rather ashamed of himself for what he had done at the dinner table.

It made him feel it more keenly because the ranchman and his family had taken it contrary to the way almost any one else would have done.

Instead of being cast out by them he had been given a present of five dollars!

This was indeed remarkable.

But the more Hop thought over it the more he felt that he had struck a very fine place.

He couldn't help thinking of how Sambo and his wife had acted when the cracker exploded, too, and that made him smile.

When it came time for supper only very light food was served, since there was to be a regular "feed" served about ten o'clock.

That is the way Ranchman Oaks put it.

Mrs. Oaks came to the kitchen as the two old servants and the Chinamen were sitting down, and looking at Hop she said:

"While it was very funny what you did at noontime, I hope you will let things go as they are now. We don't want to get the kitchen dirty, because we expect a lot of company here to-night. You are an awful smart heathen, I know; but jest be good this time, will you?"

"Me be velly muchee goodee," Hop answered, bowing politely to her. "Me no makee any touble, so be."

"All right. I'll take your word for it. I feel pretty sure that you wouldn't lie to me. Now, don't eat so much that you won't have any appetite to-night."

Hop bowed as she went out, and when the door closed he turned to Sambo and said:

"You hear what um lady say; now you velly muchee be goodee, so be."

"She done mean yo'," retorted the darky in surprise. "What fo' yo' talk dat way?"

"Allee light. Me undelstand; me makee yo' be goodee, so be."

"When yo' done git t'rough yo' supper yo' come outside, an' I'll make yo' understan' dat I aint no fool, Mister Chinee. De boss done gib yo' five dollars, 'cause he t'ink you very smart. I'll knock dat money out of yo'!"

Hop was really surprised when he heard this.

The darky had learned about the gift he had received, and it did not seem to set good with him.

Wing grinned when he saw that his brother felt uneasy over the threat.

Nothing would have suited him better than to see Hop get a thrashing at the hands of the darky.

He felt that it would do him good.

The supper was soon over with, and then, putting on a bluff, Hop pulled the big, old-fashioned pistol he always carried from under his coat and walked out of the house.

But Sambo did not appear to mind this.

He had issued the challenge, and he meant to stick to it.

He walked over to the wall and took down a rusty old musket.

Holding it ready for use he marched out of the kitchen after the Chinaman.

The moment Hop saw him his face turned a sickly hue.

He did not want to get shot, or even shot at, for that matter.

But he felt that he had to do something.

Fortunately the old weapon he had was not loaded with bullets.

There were six chambers to it and each had a load of powder in it.

On top of the powder was more powder, but not gunpowder.

It was that which makes colored fire when lighted.

There were three colors—red, blue, and green—in the chambers, two of them loaded alike, of course.

Hop had not thought the old darky would come out, and he had only pulled the old-fashioned six-shooter for a bluff.

But when he saw him with the musket he realized that he would have to do something.

Cocking the pistol he pointed it at him and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

A stream of red fire came from the muzzle and almost reached Sambo.

He uttered a sharp cry and dodged around the corner of the house.

Bang!

Hop let go again.

This time it was green fire.

Out through the kitchen came our hero and his partners, followed by the ranchman and his wife and daughter.

Bang!

Hop let a streak of blue fire go in the air, just to show them what he was doing.

The darky's wife was going on at a great rate, for she thought he had been killed by the Chinaman.

Wild quickly explained to Mrs. Oaks that Hop was simply having a little fun, and she, in turn, explained to the old woman.

But not until Sambo was found, without a scratch on him, was she satisfied.

"Me see heathen shoot straight at my man," she declared. "Much red fire come."

"But that was all there was—red fire, Betty," the ranchman's wife answered. "There wasn't any lead in the gun."

"Very bad heathen!"

"No, he isn't bad; he is funny, Betty. Don't think he is bad."

The old woman shook her head.

But she was going to try to think the way her mistress told her to, for she was great on obeying orders.

The excitement was soon over, and when Sambo finally brought the old musket into the house Wild took it from him and made an examination of it.

A smile came over his face.

"Why, the thing isn't loaded," he said. "It would require a day's work on it to make it so it would go off if a load was put in it. Then you would have to hit the cap with a hammer, for the lock is broken. That's a fine thing to get frightened about, Hop."

"Me no gittee scare; makee outee me gittee scare, lat allee," declared Hop just as though he meant it.

But Wild and his friends knew better.

They were pretty certain that he had fired his first shot in desperation, for he was very much afraid when any one got after him with a gun.

But the way it had turned out made Hop get the best of it, anyhow, for the colored fire had done that.

The Chinaman was called by the ranchman, who promptly took him to the little room where the whisky was kept.

"I reckon you're entitled ter somethin' ter drink fur that," Oaks said. "Now, don't say a word about it, but I'm goin' ter show yer somethin'."

"Allee light, Misler Oaks. You velly nicee man. Me likee you velly muchee."

"But we'll have ther drink first. Gosh! but you're ther greatest Chinaman I ever seen. Hop, do yer know I'd be be about as happy as I could be to-night if it wasn't fur one thing."

"Whattee lat?" Hop asked.

"Well, I'm afraid there'll be trouble here to-night. All ther cowboys will be here, an' Maverick Mike is bound ter be with 'em. I'm afraid he'll git in a row with Young Wild West."

"You likee him allee samee better lan you likee Misler Wild?"

"No, I don't like him so much. He does his work well, that's all. Ter tell ther truth, I'm a little afraid of him. If I was ter discharge him I'd be afraid he'd let me have a bullet ther first time he got a chance. Why, once I was dead sure that he stole a lot of my calves, but I didn't dare ter say anything about it. Maybe he didn't do it, though, so it is a good thing I didn't say nothin'."

"Lat man allee samee steallée anytling; me knowee um bad man when me see um. Mavelick Mikee no goodee! You allee samee gamble on lat, Misler Oaks."

Hop poured out a drink in the tin cup that was offered him, and bowing low to the ranchman swallowed it.

Oaks had already taken about enough to make him talkative, and when he got another one in him he was ready to tell the Chinaman all he knew.

He would have liked it if Wild and his partners had visited the little room with him, but he had learned that the scout seldom drank, and that the two boys never took anything strong, so he fell back upon the clever Chinaman, who was always ready to indulge in a little tanglefoot, as he called it.

"Misler Wild allee samee takee care of Mavelick Mikee, Misler Oaks," said Hop as he wiped his mouth. "You no wolly 'boutee lat. Now whatee you wantee showee me?"

"I want yer ter see Maggie's new pianner. It's a beauty, yer kin bet! It's a wonder we've been able ter keep her from seein' it; but we have, an' that makes it all ther better. It'll come as a surprise to her to-night."

"Where um piano?" Hop asked.

"Come with me; I'll soon show yer."

As he turned to lead the way Hop slyly slipped the bottle they had been drinking from under his coat and then followed him.

Opening the door of the store-room the ranchman went in.

Hop stepped in after him.

There was nothing like a piano to be seen.

The Chinaman knew one when he saw it, of course, and not seeing it he turned to the man questioningly.

"Can't see it, eh, Hop?" observed Oaks with a smile. "Putty well hid, I reckon."

"Velly muchee hidee," Hop admitted.

"Well, I'll show yer. We put ther wooden box ther thing come in out in ther barn. But ther pianner is right in this room. She's right behind them barrels which is piled up one on top of another, an' ther clothes-horse, with that big blanket hangin' on it, hides ther end of it. Jest step over here. It's sartinly a beauty, as I said afore."

Hop followed him, and soon the piano was disclosed to view.

He was inquisitive enough to raise the covering of the keyboard, and then, before the ranchman could stop him, he struck the keys with his left hand and ran his right thumb nearly the entire length of the keyboard.

The sounds that came from the instrument startled Hop himself, and he knew that it must have been heard in other parts of the house.

This was indeed a fact.

There was a sudden shout and then Maggie came rushing into the store-room.

The ranchman pulled Hop out of the way in time and the piano was hidden from view.

But the girl had heard it, and she knew it must be in that room.

"I have found you out, dad," she said. "I knew you would have one for me. Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Maggie," the ranchman declared, shaking his head.

"Yes, you do, dad. Tell me where it is—quick!"

Just then her mother came in, followed by the girls.

"Yer might as well let her see it now, Morris," said the

former. "You couldn't keep away from it, it seems. What did yer want ter play on it fur?"

"It wasn't me; it was Hop," was the reply. "He done it afore I could lift a hand ter stop him."

The girl grabbed Hop by the arm almost fiercely.

"Show me where it is, you almond-eyed rascal!" she cried.

Without any hesitation he did so.

Then she fairly went into ecstasies.

"Oh, dad!" she cried. "What a surprise this is!"

"Yes, Maggie, I know," he answered. "But if yer hadn't found one of them things here afore to-morrer mornin' you'd have felt mighty sore, I reckon. Of course it's a surprise, if yer want ter call it that."

"Well, it is, dad. You know it is."

"Yes, of course. But now, since yer know all about ther pianner, we may as well git it in ther front room an' let yer try it."

"Yes, do!" and the girl clapped her hands with delight.

"Call ther boys, Arietta," said the ranchman. "I reckon we'll soon shift ther blamed thing out of here. She's mighty heavy, I know, but she's got little wheels under her, so she kin be slid along putty easy."

Arietta hastened to get Wild and his partners, and in a few minutes the piano was located in the big front room.

Then Maggie sat down with the music she had brought from Denver, and for the next half hour there was music in the house—if it could be called music.

After a while Anna was induced to play a little, and she made them all open their eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

OFF FOR THE "BLOW-OUT."

Lame Jack was just about to close up his saloon when the stagecoach rolled into town.

It was only twice a week that this occurred, for the travel to and from the nearest railroad station, which was forty miles away, was nothing to brag of, as one of the older settlers put it.

But the route paid the owners pretty well for all that, for there was considerable in the way of express goods to be carried back and forth.

It happened that the stage had but one passenger on this trip.

He was a good-looking young man of twenty-three, and the suit of clothes he wore made the cowboys and settlers open their eyes.

There was something about his looks that told that he was not exactly a tenderfoot, for there was a belt about his waist and an inch or two below his tailor-made coat the muzzle of a big six-shooter could be seen.

"Yer want ter hurry up, stranger, if yer want anything out of this shanty," called out Lame Jack, who felt it his duty to take in a little more change if he could do it without spoiling his plans.

"I won't trouble you any longer than to buy a drink for myself and the crowd, and ask a question," was the reply.

"Come right in, then. I'm goin' ter a blow-out to-night,

an' I want ter git started with my old buckboard an' team in about five minutes. My wife is waitin' fur me now. She's got ther horses hitched up, an' she'll be around here after me afore I know it. It ain't often that I close up this time in ther day, but this is an occasion that sartinly demands it. A mighty good friend of mine is givin' ther blow-out, an' I wouldn't miss it fur a good deal."

"Ah, I see. Maybe it is the same 'blow-out,' as you call it, that I am going to. I want to get over to the Straight Deal Ranch."

"That's jest where we're goin', stranger. You wasn't many minutes too soon, I reckon. Ther whole crowd is goin'. Ther most of ther boys yer see here works fur Morris Oaks, yer know. They're all goin' ter be there; an' them what's got gals will have them there, too. What's it goin' ter be, young man?"

"My name is Frank Belter, and I am a lawyer from Denver. I was brought up on a ranch, but I had a longing to study law, and my father happened to be able to afford to let me have my way, so I succeeded. Please don't take me for a tenderfoot, for if you do you will make a mistake, boys."

He turned to the crowd that had gathered inside the saloon as he spoke, and there was such a careless way about him that they all took to him.

Then he told what he wanted to drink, and asked the rest to take what they liked.

It was just then that Maverick Mike came in.

He was pretty well sobered up, and he was going to take just one drink before he set out for home to tog up for the blow-out.

"Hello!" said he, looking sharply at the stranger. "Where did you drop from, young man?"

"Denver," was the reply. "What are you going to have to drink?"

"I'll take jest about two fingers of reudeye, jest ter steady my nerves, I reckon," was the reply.

Maverick Mike was certainly in a better humor after his little spree. He even grinned when he saw that the fiddler was there.

They all drank, and then Lame Jack turned to the young lawyer from Denver and said:

"I reckon you kin ride along with me an' my wife, if yer ain't got no other way ter git over ter ther ranch."

"Thank you. I'll be glad to go with you. I was wondering how I was going to get there."

"You're goin' ter ther blow-out, eh?" inquired Maverick, looking at him sharply.

"Yes; but there is only one person there who knows I am coming."

"An' you hail from Denver, yer say?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Maybe you're acquainted with ther gal what's jest come from there to-day?"

"I am. I am going to be at the blow-out on her invitation."

"Oh, yer are, eh?"

"That's right," and the young lawyer looked at him fearlessly, though it was easy to tell that he felt he was "treading on the man's corns," so to speak.

"Did yer ever talk much ter Maggie up in Denver?" asked Maverick after a pause.

"Yes. I talked to her as often as three nights in a week."

"Did yer ever hear her say anything about Maverick Mike?"

"Yes, I heard her say once that there was a cowboy on her father's ranch who bore that name. She said he had annoyed her with his attentions, and that he was a very bad man when he got full of whisky."

"Oh, she did, eh? Well, I'm Maverick Mike."

"Is that so? Well, I'm glad to meet you. I was a cowboy once myself, you know. How are you, Maverick?"

Frank Belter actually put out his hand to the villain.

"Oh, I'm putty good."

Then Maverick shook with him, and Dick Mooney and the rest of the cowboys looked relieved, for they thought there was going to be trouble.

Maverick excused himself and went outside.

He mounted his horse and rode off, being the first to leave.

Then the buckboard came around to the front of the place and Lame Jack's wife, who was driving, called out for him to hurry up and close the shanty.

"I've got a passenger," he said as he led Frank Belter out and then introduced him.

His wife was quite satisfied, so the young man threw his grip and suitcase in behind and got on the seat with them.

Lame Jack's wife did the driving, and off they went for the Straight Deal Ranch.

The cowboys soon came galloping along after them, and before they got to the ranch they were passed by them and left in the rear.

Belter told them all about himself before they got there, and he even admitted that he expected to marry Maggie Oaks.

"Well," said Lame Jack, "I reckon you've got a rival, fur Maverick Mike has been sweet on ther gal fur this good while. He'll try mighty hard ter cut yer out, see if he don't."

"Oh, he can't come anywhere near doing that, for it is all fixed," was the reply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "BLOW-OUT" BEGINS.

It was just about eight o'clock when the buckboard containing Lame Jack and his wife and the young lawyer from Denver drove up to the door of the ranch house.

Already some of the guests had arrived in the persons of ranchmen and their wives and daughters from the surrounding ranches.

The piano was going like mad just then, and Frank Belter smiled when he heard it, for he knew very well that his sweetheart was a very crude musician.

But that made him love her none the less.

He wanted her for just what she was—a plain, ordinary ranch girl, and he felt that she would soon get over her notion to become a real "city lady."

"I reckon Joe, ther fiddler, won't be needed much," observed Lame Jack as he got out of the buckboard. "That's

music, good an' plenty. 'Yankee Doodle' is ther tune, if I ain't furgot it."

"Of course it is," spoke up his wife. "Every one ought ter know that tune. That tune will live forever in ther hearts of all Americans. It ought ter, too. I wonder if that's Maggie playin'?"

"Yes, it is Maggie," answered the young lawyer. "I would know her playing among a thousand."

"Well, I never thought she'd ever be able ter play as good as that. She must have took to it awful quick-like."

Belter said nothing to this, but he made up his mind that she would play a great deal better than that before a year rolled around, or else she would quit it entirely.

The noise in the house drowned that made by the horses and buckboard when they came up, so they all went to the door, which was open, and started to walk in.

It happened that the ranchman had selected Hop as the attendant at the door, and when he saw Lame Jack he recognized him right away.

"Come light in," he said. "Evelybody welcome."

Then he caught the saloon-keeper by the arm and whispered in his ear:

"You fetchee plenty tanglefoot, so be?"

"I didn't fetch any," was the reply. "Ther boss got ten gallons yesterday. I reckon there's enough here fur all purposes."

"Allee light. Comee light in."

The three were ushered inside, and when Maggie saw her intended she forgot all about her piano and threw herself into his arms, right before the whole company.

Belter was much embarrassed, for he could hear the tittering. However, he did the right thing, for he imprinted a rousing kiss on the girl's lips, and that settled it.

Mr. and Mrs. Oaks did not know what to make of this, and they looked at each other in dismay.

"I got citified, all right, mother," said the girl as she caught the old lady about the neck. "Look at the nice man I'm going to have for a husband. He's a lawyer, mother, and a smart one, too. You didn't ever think your Maggie would marry a lawyer, did you? You thought I would pick up with some common cowboy, like Maverick, or some one else; but I wasn't built that way—not much!"

"That's ther way ter talk, Maggie!" spoke up her father, who seemed to take kindly to the young lawyer right away. "You're eighteen years old, an' I always said as how yer ought ter pick out ther man yer wanted. If yer like this feller, an' he likes you, I don't see no reason why yer shouldn't git married. But yer needn't be in no hurry about it, 'cause we want this pianner here a while yet. It cost me six hundred dollars, an' more, an' I like ter hear yer play on it."

"But if I could only play like Anna it would be somethin' worth while, dad. She can do things with it and no mistake! Why, she kin play ther 'Blue Danube' an' 'Annie Laurie' without half tryin'."

While the conversation was taking place Frank Belter stood in the center of the room, very ill at ease.

Young Wild West was equal to the emergency, however.

He had heard the name of the young man, so he soon stepped forward and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to make you acquainted with Mr. Frank Belter, of Denver."

The lawyer nodded to him and looked relieved.

Then he bowed right and left, and the next minute he was shaking hands with the company.

It was just then that the cowboys came riding up to the house—those who did not belong at the ranch.

Some of them had their girls with them, and there was much loud talk and laughter as they came swarming in.

But the ranchman had taken the cue from Wild, and he promptly took it upon himself to introduce the stranger, which was proper.

Some of the men had seen Belter over at Turner, but they shook hands with him heartily and gave him a hearty greeting.

The girls, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, shook hands with him, too, and soon Belter was perfectly at ease in the breezy company.

"Let's have a dance," suggested a buxom maiden, who was dressed in about all the colors of the rainbow. "Here's Joe, ther fiddler."

"Joe's got ter have somethin' ter wake him up first," spoke up the ranchman. "Maggie will play 'Yankee Doodle' fur yer while he's gittin' ready. She kin sartainly make ther pianner talk."

So Maggie sat down, her lover close to her to turn over the music for her, and the next minute the air was being split by some very unearthly chords.

But the majority of the company liked it, and they congratulated her warmly after she had gone through the piece seven times and decided to quit.

Then the fiddler tuned up his instrument and called out for them to take their partners for a Virginia reel.

As the couples were taking their places on the floor in came the foreman of the ranch, followed by the cowboys who worked under him.

Maverick Mike was among them. He was attired in a semi-Mexican costume, and looked rather natty, indeed.

He ran right up and seized Maggie by the hand.

"Welcome home, Maggie!" he exclaimed. "I reckon me an' you will lead this dance. We're old friends, an' we'll do ther honors. Yer ain't got so citified that you'll go back on poor old Maverick, I know. Come right on; don't you care!"

The girl was surprised, for it had come so suddenly that it almost took away her breath. But, recovering herself quickly, she pulled away from him and exclaimed:

"Take your hands off me, Maverick Mike. I want you to understand that I am a city girl now, and my fiance is here. I won't dance with you!"

"What! Goin' back on me, Maggie?" and the villain started back, just as though he felt badly over it. "Yer ain't goin' ter dance with me, eh? Where's ther galoot what's cut me out? I'll soon make quick work of him, you kin bet!"

The villain's face was livid as he uttered the last words, and as he slowly looked around his eyes rested upon the face of Frank Belter.

Belter was not much frightened, however.

He pulled a gun as quick as a flash.

"I didn't come here with the expectation of getting into trouble," he said rather coolly, "but I am always prepared to meet it. You take back what you just said or I'll drop your carcass to the floor!"

Maverick Mike uttered a snarl like that of an angry beast, and with a sudden leap forward he struck the weapon from the lawyer's hand.

Back against the wall he pushed him, and then a knife gleamed in his hand.

Young Wild West was so close by that not a single move had escaped him.

Like a panther he sprang forward, and with a well-directed blow felled the villainous cowboy to the floor.

"You came here looking for trouble, you sneaking galoot!" he exclaimed. "You were afraid to start a row with me, so you picked out some one you thought would stand for it. Now, then, you light out of here! Get up and run, or I'll put three shots in you before you drop!"

The greatest excitement now prevailed in the big living-room of the ranch house.

Some of the cowboys had drawn their guns, while others stood ready to.

They all took the side of our hero and the lawyer, it seemed.

But they did not know that Maverick had arranged with six of the worst cowpunchers to be found in that part of the country to help him clean out the ranch that night, and that they were at that moment outside waiting for his call.

Such was the fact, however. The villain had been of the opinion that Maggie would go back on him, as he called it, though he had never got that far with her that he could call her his sweetheart.

Not that he cared so much for the girl, for he was not the sort of a man to love. It was in his head that if he could marry the boss's daughter he would fall in as foreman in place of Dick Mooney, and then he might work himself up to part owner.

And fearing that this would not come about he had made ready to raid the ranch while the blow-out was at its height, and, if possible, carry off Maggie.

The villain got upon his feet and without a word sneaked for the door.

He did not call for his men to come in, for he feared Young Wild West would shoot him if he did.

When he had gone Wild turned to the fiddler and exclaimed:

"Strike up the music! I reckon the dance will go on now."

The next minute Joe, the fiddler, was scraping away, and the couples quickly started the dance.

But our hero quickly left the house, going out by the back way.

He wanted to know what became of Maverick Mike.

CHAPTER X.

THE "COWBOY BUFFER" ARRANGES FOR A FIGHT.

There were times when Maverick Mike could be cool and crafty.

As enraged as he was when Young Wild West ordered him to leave the house he managed to get his mind into a pretty fair state for thinking rapidly.

He knew quite well that he stood no show with the boy; he had been taught that much only that morning.

Consequently he must depend upon his wits to help him out.

As we have stated, he cared little for the ranchman's daughter, other than by winning her he might get ahead in the world.

When he went out of the house he dropped her entirely.

But when he did this he picked up another girl.

It was Arietta.

She was Young Wild West's sweetheart. He had heard and seen quite enough to make him know that much.

"She's ther one I want," he muttered as he headed for the place where he had told his six villainous friends to be. "I'll kidnap her jest ter spite Young Wild West, an' I'll do it afore mornin'. Then let ther boy come ter look fur her! That's what I want! Ther spring round-up is ter start to-morrer, but I reckon they won't have me ter help. I've quit workin' as a cowboy forever. I'm a bad man, as I've always said, an' I am bad in every sense of ther word. Of course I'd like ter pop over that young lawyer what's captured ther heart of ther foolish girl; but I don't want ter git him half as bad as I do Young Wild West. I'll jest have a little talk with my boys. I know I kin trust 'em, 'cause I felt of 'em good an' strong afore I took 'em in with me."

Less than a hundred yards from the house, under a clump of trees, were the men.

They had all been cowboys, but had either given it up or been discharged for bad behavior.

Now they were outlaws, ready to do almost any sort of villainy for the sake of getting hold of a few dollars.

Maverick had spent nearly all his month's wages in getting them what he called "right," and now he was satisfied he had them that way.

"What's ther matter, Maverick?" asked one of them as he strode up and made himself known. "Yer didn't stay long, did yer?"

"No, Barley," was the reply. "I got in trouble as soon as I got there, an' I had ter leave mighty quick or git shot."

"Had ter leave mighty quick? Why, that's funny! Who was there that could make you leave afore yer got ready? Who was goin' ter shoot yer?"

"Young Wild West."

"What! Ther boy yer was tellin' us about?"

"Yes. He's there. I didn't expect ter find him there, but he's there all right. I got in a row with ther feller what's took my gal away from me, an' jest when I had him right ther boy ups an' knocks me down. I hadn't no show, so I had ter take my medicine. There ain't no man as would have a show with Young Wild West, boys, especially after he'd knocked him down with his fist. He's only a boy, but he kin hit jest about as hard as a mule kin kick. I know what I'm talkin' about, fur I've been knocked down, boys."

"Huh!" said one of them. "I'd like ter meet ther boy as could knock me down with his fist. I was ther boss boxer at Reno three years ago. They called me ther Cowboy Buffer, an' I won three straight battles, an' I got somethin' like 'leven hundred dollars out of it. Of course I got whipped later on, but it was by a big galoot they brought from Chicago, who weighed nigh on ter twenty pounds

more'n I did. But I'd like ter see ther boy as could knock me down, believe me when I say it! I'm as good now as I ever was with my fists."

"I know you're a good one, Holt; but you take my advice an' don't run up agin' Young Wild West. He's a regular world-beater, he is. Don't think that because he's a boy he ain't as smart as a man. He's a good deal smarter than any man I ever met, you included."

The Cowboy Buffer laughed derisively.

"Blamed if I don't go to ther house an' challenge any galoot there ter fight me with bare knuckles, an' nothin' else!" he exclaimed. "You've got me interested, Maverick. By thunder! I've got ter do it, that's all there is ter it. I'll go there an' make out that I'm a man lookin' fur a job. Then it won't take me long ter show what I am. If this boy is anything like what you say he is he won't give no one else a chance after I put out ther challenge."

"Yer kin do it if yer want to, Holt. But if I was you I wouldn't do it."

Maverick spoke in a solemn tone of voice, showing that he meant just what he said.

But the Cowboy Buffer was determined.

"I'm goin', boys," he declared. "Maverick, if I kin do anything fur you while I'm there, jest say ther words."

"Well, if yer kin git hold of ther best lookin' gal there, which is ther one with ther golden hair an' blue eyes, jest whisk her away. I've made up my mind ter kidnap her. She's Young Wild West's sweetheart, an' I want ter scoop her so he'll foller an' try ter find her. Then I'll git a chance ter shoot him, which I'm bound ter do ther minute I git ther chance ter draw a bead on him. I've got ter down Young Wild West, boys. There ain't no use talkin'. Ther world ain't big enough fur ther two of us."

"Oh, we'll help yer down him, Maverick," Barley spoke up. "But we want ter git some money out of this thing, too. We want ter git all that Oaks has got in ther house. That's what we agreed on, yer know. We was ter have all ther money that was took, an' you was ter git ther darter."

"That's right. I'll stick ter what I said, only I'm after a different gal now. I want Young Wild West's sweetheart."

"Well, if I kin git in that house an' whip Young Wild West I reckon I'll have a chance ter go around a little," said the Cowboy Buffer. "I'll find out where ther money is, you kin bet. I'll bet all I've got that I'll lick ther boy, an' I'll win, too. If he's sich a great fighter maybe I'll git odds. I've only got nine dollars, but that's a putty good starter. Maybe some of yer wants ter chip in an' make a bigger bet of it."

No one seemed disposed to do this, for the others acted as though they agreed with Maverick when he said that no one stood a show with Young Wild West.

"Where did yer git nine dollars from, Holt?" Maverick asked.

"Oh, we held up a ranchman who was comin' over ter ther blow-out. He was all alone, an' he was easy. He had jest fifty-four dollars with him, an' we divided it up. We chucked his carcass in ther creek after we got through with him. I reckon it's all right. We're outlaws, anyhow, so what do we care?"

Maverick shrugged his shoulders.

Such a cold-blooded admission as this staggered him, even though he knew he had scoundrels to deal with.

But it made him more sure that he could depend upon the men doing almost anything he wanted them to, so long as there was money in sight.

That there was he felt certain, for he now meant to wait until the "blow-out" was about over, and then the most of those in the house would be asleep.

In spite of the advice all his friends gave him, Holt was determined to go to the house and announce himself as a man looking for a job.

Then he would offer to fight any man in the place for the amount he possessed.

Seeing that nothing could persuade him to change his mind, Maverick gave him a dollar so he would have ten to bet, and then the Cowboy Buffer set out, first mounting his horse so it would appear that he had just ridden in from the prairie.

"We'll all sneak up as close as we kin, an' if we can't see, we kin hear what goes on," said Barley.

"That's right," one of the others answered.

Barley went on up to the house, his horse on a sharp trot.

The rest left their horses under the trees and sneaked up through the darkness.

They had not been gone long when a lithe figure stepped up to the horses and took charge of them.

It was Young Wild West!

The dashing young deadshot had followed Maverick Mike and he had heard every word that had been said.

Wild was never much surprised at anything he saw or heard, but when he learned the plans of the scoundrels he was almost tempted to open fire on them right then and there.

But his usual coolness prevailed, and he made up his mind to have a round-up of scoundrels before the spring round-up began.

As might be supposed, the boy was eager to fight the Cowboy Buffer with fists.

Though the man was bigger and heavier than he, as he had been able to discern, that made no difference.

He had learned the art of self-defense, and learned it well.

Wild feared no man, whether it was a fight with fists or with any sort of weapon.

He was as quick as lightning and active as a panther, and being cool and self-possessed at all times, he depended on his skill and strength to carry him through.

His face wore a smile as he hurried to get around to the rear of the house, so he would be inside when the villain came in.

He just managed to do this, and after hastily letting Charlie and Jim know what was up, he walked to the door, where Oaks was talking to the stranger.

"Here's a man lookin' fur a job, Wild," said the ranchman. "I reckon I'll hire him, 'cause ther spring round-up starts to-morrer, an' I'll need all ther men I kin git."

"That's right, Mr. Oaks. Hire him, by all means. He looks like a husky fellow. Built on the lines of a prize-fighter, I should say."

Nothing could have been said that would have suited Holt any better.

As he came in at the ranchman's invitation he clenched his fist and felt of his muscle.

"Young feller, you must be a putty good jedge of folks. I used ter be a prize-fighter. They called me ther Cowboy Buffer out in Reno, an' I whipped all what come afore me till they brought a real professional from Chicago, an' he was so much heavier than me that he got ther best of me. But I fought without trainin', an' I had too much bug-juice in me at ther time."

There was no doubt that Holt thought he could whip the boy in a fight.

He was so confident that he put himself in a sparring attitude before him.

The fiddler was playing his loudest in the big living-room of the ranch and the laughter of the dancers rang out in peals.

No one knew of the villain's presence save Wild and his two partners and the ranchman.

"You wouldn't think about fighting me—a boy, would you?" asked our hero, making out that he was afraid of the man.

"Of course not," was the reply. "But I'll jest bet ten dollars, which is all ther money I've got, that I kin lick any man on ther ranch!"

"And any boy, either, I suppose?"

Wild spoke in the cool and easy way that was so natural to him, and Oaks looked at him in surprise.

Charlie and Jim remained in the background, both feeling as though they would like to take a chance at the scoundrel.

"Well, it ain't likely that a boy would want ter face me in a fist-fight," answered Holt. "You wouldn't, would yer?"

"Oh, I don't know. To tell the truth, I don't think you could whip me. I learned how to box when I was about fourteen years of age. I went to a school in St. Louis, and I whipped the bully the second day I was there. Then I took lessons from a good instructor, and it was not long before I was able to put up a good fight. I reckon you couldn't whip me, boy as I am."

"Well, I'll try yer, if yer feel like it. It'll be jest a friendly bout, yer know. But ter make it interestin', I'll bet yer ten dollars I'll make yer holler enough."

"All right. I'll go you. Come right in here. The dance is over. We'll let everybody see the fun."

The fiddler had stopped playing and some of the dancers were coming out into the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen," called out Wild in a voice loud enough to be heard by all, "the next thing will be a boxing bout between the Cowboy Buffer and myself. This wasn't down on the programme, but I reckon it will be worth seeing, just the same. Those of the ladies who don't like to see blood spilled had better keep away, for I expect to get hit on the nose the first thing. My nose bleeds easily, you know."

Holt began to grow a trifle uneasy, for he did not like the cool way the boy had.

But he was in for it now, and feeling that he was able to win he followed Wild into the big room, where the biggest part of the guests were assembled.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIST FIGHT.

To say that the guests were surprised would be expressing it mildly.

None of them knew who the stranger was, much less expecting that he was going to fight with Young Wild West.

But the cool and easy way of our hero soon reassured them, and they gathered around expectantly, some of the girls retiring to another part of the house.

There was no carpet on the floor, so if there was any blood spilled it could be easily cleaned up.

Holt put on a very bold front.

"We'll let ther boss hold ther stake money," he said. "Ladies an' gents, this is goin' ter be jest a friendly bout, though there's money up. I'm a stranger here, an' I've jest been hired ter help with ther round-up which starts to-morrer. I'm ther Cowboy Buffer, an' this boy seems ter think he kin whip me."

"I reckon yer don't know who you're up agin', do yer?" asked Lame Jack as he limped over the room.

"Oh, that don't make no difference. I ain't afraid of no man, much less a boy. Maybe he's mighty quick, an' all that. But he ain't goin' ter hit me. If he does manage ter land a blow or two it won't hurt me any. I'm as tough as an old bull, an' nothin' short of an ax would knock me down."

"All right. But I'll jest tell yer that it's Young Wild West, ther champion deadshot, what you're goin' ter fight," said Lame Jack, putting emphasis on the words.

"Well, this ain't goin' ter be no shootin' game; it's ter be a fight with jest fists. I'll let some one hold my gun an' knife, an' he'll do ther same."

"That's right," said Wild, and he quickly passed his weapons to Jim Dart.

Lame Jack took those of the Buffer, and then the two stepped to the center of the room.

The majority of the men present rather liked the proceeding, for it was something more than they had expected to see at the "blow-out," and they were always interested in contests of any kind.

"Are we going to fight by rounds?" Wild asked, smiling at the villain.

"No, there ain't no use in that. We'll jest fight till it's over with, no hittin' when a man's down. If you happen ter knock me down, an' I don't git up by ther time ther boss counts ten, slow, then I'm done fur. Ther same way if you git knocked down."

"All right. I understand, so say when you're ready."

The Buffer took off his hat.

"I'm ready," he said, squaring off after the fashion of a prize-fighter.

Biff!

Our hero shot out his left straight from the shoulder and caught him on the short ribs.

The man staggered back, quivering like a leaf, and acting on the advantage he had gained by the first blow, Wild leaped after him and landed a right on his cheek.

Down went Holt as though he had been hit by an ax.

A shout of applause went up, some of the females in the room joining in.

But when he said he was able to stand punishment the Cowboy Buffer had told no lie.

He was one of the tough kind, stockily built and with a thick skin and flesh as hard as iron.

He got upon his feet with amazing quickness.

Like a mad bull he rushed at the agile boy.

Out shot his right, and then his left, but they both hit but the empty air.

Spat!

Wild struck him a hard one on the ear and sent him staggering.

Then he went right at him, and another right sent him to the floor again.

"I reckon you'll have to take a few more lessons before you issue any more challenges," he said, smiling coolly at the fallen man. "You have forgotten about all you ever knew about fighting, I reckon."

Wild had left the horses belonging to the villains at the rear of the house, though he had not taken time to tie them in his haste to get inside.

It was his intention to lead his partners and some of the cowboys out and rope them as soon as the fight was over.

But it so happened that the horses had not stayed where he left them.

They had come on around to the front of the house, and seeing them, Maverick Mike and the rest had quickly caught them, and were waiting for their chum to appear, either as a victor or defeated man.

Owing to the fact that those in the room shut off the view that might have been had through the windows, they could not see what was going on.

But the cheering they heard told them plainly that the Cowboy Buffer was getting the worst of it.

This time the villain rolled over once or twice in an effort to rise, and then lay perfectly still.

The last blow Wild delivered had landed squarely on the point of his jaw and it was too much for even the tough cowboy.

Ranchman Oaks counted ten slowly, and then handed Wild the money.

"That's about all, I reckon," said the boy coolly. "Now, then, we have something else on hand. There are six scoundrels outside who must be rounded up in a hurry. Come on, boys!"

Followed by Charlie and Jim, the brave boy made a dash for the front door.

Those of the cowboys who had their lariats with them dashed after them, not knowing just what was on hand.

Holt recovered his senses just then, and leaping to his feet he made for an open window.

Lame Jack and the fiddler were sent sprawling to the floor, and with a yell of defiance the villain leaped out into the darkness.

He saw his friends near at hand with the horses, and he ran to them with wonderful quickness.

The next moment they all were mounted and riding from the ranch house.

"Too late, boys!" called Young Wild West. "They have got their horses."

CHAPTER XII.

HOP SEES A "CLAZY NIGGEE MAN."

With their horses all at the barn, which was a good hundred yards from the house, there was small chance of our friends catching the villains.

A couple of the excited cowboys fired shots at the fleeing scoundrels, but derisive yells from them told that they had failed to hit anything.

"Take it easy, boys," said Wild after he had hastily thought it over. "The round-up starts to-morrow morning, and the first to be rounded up will be the seven villains. We'll find them, all right, for they won't go far. Maverick Mike wants my life, and he will try and hang around to get a shot at me."

"Maverick Mike!" gasped the ranchman. "Was he with 'em?"

"Yes, he's the leader, Mr. Oaks. I followed him when he left the house, you see, and I saw him go to where the six men were waiting out there under the trees. Then I heard quite an interesting conversation."

"Yer did?"

The ranchman was greatly surprised at this.

"Come on back in the house. We'll get the galoots to-morrow, for, as I just said, I am sure they won't go very far away. I'll tell you all just what the game was."

Into the house they all went, and then the boy related the whole story.

"Well, ter think that Maverick would do sich a thing as that!" exclaimed the ranchman.

"I always knowed he wasn't too good ter do 'most anything when he was full of tanglefoot," declared Dick Mooney, the foreman, "but I didn't think he was bad enough ter put up a job like that, blamed if I did!"

The rest of the cowboys belonging to the ranch were of the same opinion, and they hastened to say so.

But there was all the evidence, cold and convincing, and there was no getting over it.

"If you'd only told us ter go out an' ketch ther sneakin' coyotes, Wild," said Cheyenne Charlie, shaking his head, "we'd have got 'em while ther fight was goin' on."

"And then you would have missed seeing the fight, Charlie," was the laughing reply. "But never mind. We'll round up the galoots to-morrow."

"Yes, and I'll take a hand in it, too!" spoke up Arietta. "Since Maverick Mike wants me I'll show him that I want him, and I'll get him, too, see if I don't."

"That's right, Et. You shall join in the round-up," Wild hastened to say.

A cheer went up for the plucky girl, for nearly every one present had heard about her daring and skill.

Arietta looked at them and nodded.

"You will find out that I mean just what I say," she declared.

"Well," said Wild after a pause, "I reckon the dancing can go on now. Forget about what just happened, ladies and gentlemen. Fiddler, just strike up something for a quadrille. Come on, Et."

There was magic in the words of the boy, and in less than

three minutes the sets were made up and the dancing was going on in full blast.

Lawyer Belter was not at all out of his element, for he had often been present at such dances, and he did so well that he was applauded roundly by the cowboys.

Meanwhile there were those at the gathering who had a great fondness for the whisky the ranchman had in such abundance.

Oaks himself had been celebrating a little too strong, and in spite of what his wife said, he continued to take the guests to the little room where the whisky was kept.

Hop had been doing a little too much drinking, too, but he was generally on hand every time he saw the ranchman heading that way.

While our hero was enjoying the quadrille Oaks called two other ranchmen, who were neighbors, and the three went to the little room together.

Hop followed them, but did not go in.

Instead of doing that he took the key the boss had unlocked the door with and slipped away with it.

He knew Oaks was just about enough under the influence to make him forget about trying to lock the door, for once before he had done it.

Hop did not want to steal the whisky for his own benefit altogether.

Sambo, the darky, had been complaining that the boss had not given him a fair share of it.

The fact was that the darky was one of the sort who got tipsy on a small quantity of liquor, and, knowing this, the boss did not want him to get that way.

When he did get a little tipsy Sambo was apt to "cut up" in a way that was not pleasing to see.

He had a mania for running about with a big carving-knife, declaring that he was a general of the army, and that he was going to free all the slaves in creation.

He had seen a great deal of the war in the South, and it always worked on his mind when he got under the influence of liquor.

Hop did not know this, but since the darky had asked him to get him some whisky he was going to do it.

Waiting till the three men came out of the room Hop watched to see what the ranchman would do when he found the key of the door missing.

But he simply pushed the door to and went on.

The Chinaman laughed softly to himself.

Then he went inside and filled two empty bottles he had with him.

That was all he needed, so he put the key back in the lock and left it.

He found the darky and his wife in the kitchen.

With them were two more servants who had come over with one of the ranchmen.

They were both darkies, too, and were of the male persuasion.

The three were playing a game with dice, while Sambo's wife sat nodding in a chair, a hot cup of coffee before her.

So interested were the gamblers that they did not look up when the Chinaman entered.

Wing had crept away somewhere and was sound asleep, depending upon his being able to awaken when it came time for the supper.

Hop stepped softly over and took the cup of coffee from the table.

Then he poured about half of it out and filled it up with the whisky.

Not satisfied with this, he picked up a pepper-box, and unscrewing the top dumped the contents in the cup.

"Too badee me no think of um peppee before," he thought. "Len me no havee wastee um goodee tanglefoot."

He stirred the pepper in with the spoon that was in the cup and then placed it before the dozing old woman.

Then he suddenly let out a yell and brought one of the bottles down upon the table with a bang.

The dice game stopped at once, while the players looked at him in surprise.

"Me fetchee lillie tanglefoot, Sambo," he said, smiling at the old fellow. "You allee samee helpee youself. You fiends takee lillie dlink, too, so be."

"T'ank yo', Marser Hop," replied the darky. "Youse am a fine Chinee, sure."

Sambo did not wait for a glass or cup, but placing the bottle to his lips he swallowed nearly half of it without stopping.

His wife cried out in protest, but she was too late.

"Lat allee light," said Hop, waving his hand at her. "You allee samee dlink um coffee, so be."

"I no drink rum," she declared. "Coffee is better. Rum is no good for Sambo. It makes him crazy."

"Allee light. Me likee see um crazy niggee man, so be. Me wantee see how um lookee."

The other two darkies quickly finished the balance of the whisky that was in the bottle, and then the old woman took a good sip of her coffee.

Between the pepper and whisky her throat was burned so badly that she let out a yell and began dancing around the kitchen.

Then Sambo let out a whoop like a savage Indian, and running for a closet, grabbed a big carving-knife.

"Look out, dar!" he cried, his eyes rolling and his mouth beginning to froth. "Me de general, come to free de slaves. Look out, white man!"

He made a slash at one of the other darkies, who quickly ran out of the room.

After him went Sambo, who already felt the effects of the big quantity of liquor he had swallowed, and the frightened darky headed for the room where the dancing was going on.

Hop followed to see the fun, for he was in just a state of mind that made him forget that a tragedy might be the result.

Of course the dance was broken up right away.

The girls screamed and got behind their partners and there was a great commotion.

But the ranchman was equal to the occasion, however.

Before Sambo had hurt any one with the knife he tripped him up and took it from him.

Then he gave him a pretty good beating and called for help to get him to bed.

"Lat velly funny, Misler Charlie," said Hop as the scout passed by him. "Lat um first timee me see um crazy niggee man, so be."

"I'll bet you was ther cause of ther rumpus, you yaller heathen!" was the reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END OF THE "BLOW-OUT."

The second interruption of the evening, while it was rather startling to some of the guests, did not create anything like the excitement the first had.

Sambo was duly put to bed by those who carried him from the room, and the whisky he had drunk soon put him to sleep.

That wound him up for the night, anyhow.

Mrs. Oaks caught her husband after it was over, and taking him by the sleeve, she led him aside, where they might have a nice little talk.

"Morris," said she, "you have got altogether too much liquor in the house."

"I know it, my dear," was the admission. "That's ther reason I am trying to get rid of it."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I reckon I'll help you get rid of it. If things go on this way there will be no round-up started to-morrow. An' everything's all ready, too. But I'll help you get rid of the whisky. Hand me ther key of that room, Morris."

The ranchman fumbled in his pockets, but could not find it.

There was nothing strange about this, since it was in the lock of the door, just as Hop had placed it.

"I can't find it," Oaks declared after he had searched every pocket. "I reckon I furgot ter lock ther door ther last time I was in there."

"Forgot to lock ther door? Why, you must be gettin' as crazy as Sambo was! Don't you know that any one is likely to go in there an' drink enough of ther stuff to kill 'em? Morris Oaks, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, that's what you had! I'll just see about this!"

The ranchman meekly nodded for her to go ahead and do it, and then she swept away, her bombazine dress rustling as she went.

She did not stop until she reached the room, either, and finding the key in the door she went inside.

Then Mrs. Oaks did something that really was to her credit.

She knew that the whisky would make more or less trouble before morning, so she calmly poured all she could find out of the window.

Not a drop remained in the room when she had done, and as she turned to walk away she exclaimed:

"There! I reckon some of them will sober up now. I was always opposed ter any one drinkin'; but this was an occasion when we all wanted ter make merry, an' I didn't object when Morris said he was going to get some tanglefoot for ther boys. But this ends it! There ain't goin' ter be no more tanglefoot in this house, not while I'm it's mistress, anyhow. Why, I reckon that Young Wild West an' Jim Dart is about ther only two in ther crowd, except ther gals, that haven't touched any of the stuff. That whisky I jest throwed away might have cost good money, but I don't care!"

But if the good woman had only known what became of the whisky she threw out of the window she would have been more angry still.

The fact was that Hop Wah had heard her lecturing her husband, and when she asked for the key he divined what she was up to right away.

Having paid frequent visits to the room Hop knew something about it.

He started for it ahead of the woman, and reaching it, carefully closed the door.

He looked around and found a pail there that held the water the glasses had been washed in.

There was only one window to the room, and Hop emptied the pail and then jumped out himself.

He was none too soon in doing this, for he had scarcely started to listen when Mrs. Oaks floated into the room, ready for the business she had on hand.

Hop was quick to think and quick to act.

As the woman started to empty the first of the jugs he cleverly held the pail and caught the whisky.

He did this all through, and scarcely a drop of the liquor went to the ground, as she supposed it did.

Hop had a pail half full of tanglefoot now and he did not know what to do with it.

But he thought he had better find bottles to put it in, so after the ranchman's wife left the room he vaulted through the window and secured what he wanted.

Then he went out and around to the kitchen.

There was no one there now but the two visiting servants, and they were sound asleep in their chairs.

They, too, had imbibed too much whisky.

The blow-out that night at the Straight Deal Ranch would have made a fine subject for a temperance lecturer.

Hop sat down and quietly filled his bottles.

Then he hid them for future use.

This done, he came back and looked at the two sleeping colored men.

The Chinaman grinned.

The temptation was too great for him, so he resolved to play a trick upon them.

There was only one way to make a complete job of it, and that was to resort to his firecracker game.

It was an old, old way of practical joking, but Hop did not care for that.

He knew that a sharp report would do more towards rousing a sleeper than almost anything else.

True, a pail of cold water would do it, but that would not be a joke. That would be downright cruelty.

Hop had a few more of the crackers made up, and after he had pondered over it for a minute or two he produced one.

The two darkies were resting their heads on the table and snoring away as though trying to outdo each other.

Hop calmly struck a match, lighted a cigar, and then applied the match to the fuse of the cracker.

He put it under the table, and then hastily went out of the back door.

Bang!

He had hardly got there when it exploded with a loud report.

Hop watched through the window, and when he saw the two darkies fall over backward, as though they were trying to be exactly alike in what they did, he laughed to his heart's content.

But he knew a crowd would rush into the kitchen right

away to try and ascertain the cause of the trouble, so he ran around to the front of the house and sat down on the porch.

Puffing calmly upon his cigar he waited until he heard some one come out of the front door.

He knew who it was, for he could tell the steps.

It was Cheyenne Charlie.

"What did yer do to ther darkies, Hop?" the scout asked as he came and sat down close to him.

"Me allee samee catchee sleepee, so me blowee uppee with um firecracker," was the reply.

Hop thought there was no use in trying to lie out of it, as he would surely get the blame anyhow.

Charlie chuckled.

He liked a joke himself, and when he thought of how it must have been he could not help laughing.

But he wanted to tell the Chinaman something which he thought would be rather surprising to him.

"Hop," said he, "I reckon yer won't git no more tanglefoot to-night."

"Whattee mattee?"

The clever Chinaman affected great surprise.

"Well, Oaks's wife poured ther whole business out of ther window. Ther ground had a good drink, I reckon."

"Lat too bad," said Hop, shaking his head. "But me no care, so be. Me gottee allee me wantee."

"I reckon yer have. That ain't no lie you've told, anyhow."

"Wantee smokee um cigar, Misler Charlie?"

"Yes; give me one for Wild, too. He said a little while ago he would like to have one of your cigars. He wants something a little strong."

"Allee light."

Hop handed over the cigars, not thinking that Charlie had merely used our hero's name so they would be genuine cigars, free from any powder or other explosive.

He lighted one and sat there smoking.

By this time the night was pretty well advanced.

It was nearly time for supper, and as they heard dishes rattling in the room back of them they both began to grow hungry.

Dancing struck up just then, so Charlie got up and went inside.

Hop grew very drowsy then, and his cigar dropped from his mouth, and half a minute later he was dozing.

But he did not doze for long.

Suddenly two dark forms appeared, and creeping up to him softly they seized him and ran around the house with him.

They were the darkies he had aroused with the cracker.

It is hardly necessary to say that Cheyenne Charlie had put up the job.

He thought it would do the fun-loving Chinaman good if his two victims got hold of him and gave him a good mauling.

This they did, too, and every one was satisfied save the Chinaman.

But he soon forgot it when he was called to supper, for he was rather hungry.

Nothing worth recording took place after that, and when morning dawned Cheyenne Charlie was the only one awake in the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE START FOR THE ROUND-UP.

Young Wild West had not taken a great deal of sleep during the night, but he was as fresh as ever when he arose shortly after daylight began.

He was anxious to get after the seven villains and round them up, and he wanted to take three or four of the cowboys in addition to his two partners.

It was Charlie who aroused him, as per agreement. He had stood the last two hours' watch, and he had indulged in even less sleep than our hero.

But one night never interfered much with our hero and his partners.

They were hardened to all sorts of things, and they were made of the sort of material that can well stand it.

Jim was soon up, and then the three walked outside and took a look around.

The broad yellow streaks in the east told pretty well that there was a fine day ahead.

As they looked around in every direction the only living things they could see was a herd of cattle grazing off to the south.

The cattle were not scattered, so it occurred to them that there would be little trouble in taking care of them and getting them to the corral.

Where the trouble would come in was the scattered yearlings and the strayed cows with calves.

"Boys," said Wild, "I reckon we'll help Boss Oaks with his round-up. He is what I call a pretty good sort of a man, though, like a good many, he has one bad failing."

"What's that, Wild?" asked the scout, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"He is too fond of strong drink."

"Oh, that don't amount ter nothin'. It ain't likely he keeps it up right along. Yer couldn't expect much else in a case like this. His citified darter come home an' he had ter celebrate, didn't he?"

"He celebrated, all right," spoke up Dart with a laugh; "but his wife rather cut his fun short when she emptied the whisky out of the window."

"That was a putty clever thing, wasn't it?" and the scout grinned.

"I wonder how much of the whisky Hop got hold of before she threw it away?" said Wild, shaking his head. "That Chinaman never gets left, you know. He'll have bottles of whisky hidden around for the next week to come, and I'll bet on it!"

"Oh, that's sartin," Charlie nodded. "I seen him go to ther room where ther stuff was at least half a dozen times with ther boss. It's funny how Oaks come ter take ter Hop, after he'd made his kitchen look like a hog-pen turned upside down."

"Well, he likes a little fun, and the trick Hop played on Wing and the servants struck him just right. He would not have cared if the whole kitchen had been blown up."

"I don't believe he would," said Jim.

"Well, boys, a little coffee won't go bad pretty soon, and with a good chunk of broiled tenderloin and some bread I

reckon I can make a meal that will keep me in trim till we round up Maverick Mike and his gang."

"That same dose will do me, too," spoke up Dart, shaking his head approvingly.

"Me, too," added the scout, smacking his lips in anticipation. "It don't make no difference how late I eat a supper; I'm jest as hungry when breakfast-time comes."

"Well, let's go into the kitchen and see what we can do."

They went around to the back, since the entire house was taken up by the sleepers.

The men had bunked in all over the house, with the exception of the big room where the dancing had been held, for this had been left to the females.

In the kitchen were Hop and Wing and the two darkies who had come along with their boss just to spend the evening with Sambo.

They all lay upon the floor and were sleeping as soundly as though morning was a long way off.

The scout grinned when he saw them.

"How would a firecracker do about now, Wild?" he asked.

"No, Charlie," was the reply. "There is no use in arousing the rest. You might arouse Wing, though. We want him to get us something to eat."

The scout nodded, and stepping over to the sleeping Chinaman he caught hold of his queue and lifted him to his feet.

"Whattee mattee?" cried Wing, rubbing his eyes and staring about him sleepily.

"Get some coffee on the stove," Wild answered. "Hurry up! Then see to broiling some of the beef that is hanging up out in the outhouse. We've got important business on hand, and we want our breakfast before we get at it."

"Allee light, Misler Wild," and the cook brightened up right away.

He hastened to the well outside, and drawing water, treated his face and hands to a good wash.

Then he hastened to kindle a fire in the kitchen stove.

"I reckon we don't want them galoots layin' around here in ther way, do we?" asked Charlie, nodding toward Hop and the two darkies.

"No, I can't say that we do," our hero answered.

"All right, then. Jim, lend us a hand."

The boy understood, and in less than two minutes all three of the sleepers were seized and dragged outside.

They were awakened, of course, and it was not long before they understood what was going on, and that it was daylight.

The sun was just rising when Wing had the breakfast prepared.

Then, just as they were sitting down to it, Arietta appeared on the scene.

"I guess I am in time," she said with a smile. "I want to take part in the round-up of the villains, you know, Wild."

"All right, Et," was the reply. "Sit down and eat your breakfast."

She was not long in making ready for it, and then they all ate together.

The rest were still sleeping when they made for the barn to get their horses.

They found two of the cowboys there loading up the

grub wagons preparatory to starting out on the range for the round-up, and when they told them that they wanted three or four good men to go with them on the trail of Maverick Mike, Dick Mooney was quickly aroused.

He awoke three others, who he declared were just the ones for the purpose, and they were not long in getting ready.

They had rations all prepared, so they ate as they rode away with our friends.

They were a little surprised at seeing a girl with the party, but when they remembered that Arietta had declared that she was going to help catch the scoundrel who had planned to kidnap her the night before they gave her credit for sticking to it.

Wild was not long in finding the trail.

The villains had ridden straight away from the ranch, and when he made the discovery that the horses' tracks led to the trail that went toward Turner he hardly knew what to make of it.

"The galoots were pretty bold if they went over to the town," he observed, shaking his head as though he could hardly believe that such was the case. "But it points that way, and so we'll follow the tracks, that's all."

It was no difficult matter to follow them, since they had been made after the guests had come to the ranch, and they were the only fresh tracks that led in that direction.

The little party rode on, and as they gradually neared the town it became plain to them that the villains had gone there.

Owing to the fact that they were following a trail our friends had not ridden very hard, and when there were yet three or four miles between them and the town a horseman showed up behind them.

It did not take any of them long to see who it was.

Hop Wah was coming.

"That heathen is bound ter be in ther game, it seems," said the scout, shaking his head. "I wonder what struck him?"

"What generally strikes him in a case of this kind?" asked our hero. "Don't you know that Hop always wants to be in at the finish?"

"And he comes in very handy sometimes, if I know anything about it," Arietta added.

"There's no mistake about that, Et," Wild spoke up.

"Well, he sartinly is a great Chinee, anyhow," said the cowboy foreman. "That joke of his with ther chicken was about ther best thing I ever heard of. An' look how he started ther nigger a-goin' last night! That was a regular circus with all ther trimmin's throwed in. Ha! ha! ha!"

The three men with him joined in the laugh, for they were of the sort who enjoyed a joke, even if it happened to be on them.

They all slowed down, and then it was not long before Hop came riding up.

Mounted on his piebald mustang he made a rather comical picture.

He was smoking a big black-looking Mexican cigar, and when he got alongside them he appeared to be perfectly at his ease.

"Me comee, too, Misler Wild," he said, smiling blandly. "Maybe me allee samee helpee with um lound-up."

"All right, Hop," was the reply. "Have you got your gun loaded?"

"Yes, Misler Wild. Allee samee loadee with um led fire and um lillie blood, so be."

"Red fire and a little blood!" echoed one of the cowboys. "What does he mean by a little blood?"

"Oh, he sometimes puts capsules containing a red liquid in the chambers in the place of bullets," our hero explained. "Maybe you'll have a chance to see him shoot one of them before we are through."

"Well, by ginger! What he won't do next I don't know!"

CHAPTER XV.

ARIETTA AND THE ROUND-UP.

Thanking their stars at escaping so easily, Maverick Mike and his six colleagues rode on until they reached the trail that led to Turner.

"Which way now, boys?" asked Barley as he slackened pace and looked at his companions in an undecided way.

"Right on to ther town," said Maverick promptly.

"That wouldn't do, would it, Maverick?" queried Holt, who sported a black eye and a big lump on the side of his face as a result of his fight with Young Wild West.

"Why won't it do?" was the reply. "We'll go right ter Lame Jack's Roost an' open up ther place. Whisky is all we need now—we need it bad, too. You galoots ain't never been there, but I have, an' I know jest what ter do. There ain't a galoot in ther town what'll dare ter say anything ter me. I know that all right. I've got 'em all scared ter death, boys. I'm ther terror around these diggin's, an' no mistake. You come on with me."

"All right, Maverick. We'll do as you say," replied Barley, who seemed to speak for the six men.

The villains rode on, and when they finally reached the town they found that most of the houses were in darkness.

The store was closed, so they rode right around to the rear of the saloon, unobserved by anybody.

It was no hard task to force an entrance to the place. Maverick did it himself.

Then the horses were tied among some trees in the rear and they all went inside.

The lamp in the back room was lighted and then whisky and cigars were brought forth.

The six men had never visited the place, as they had been lying low after reaching the vicinity of the town, taking up their quarters in a camp they had in a neighboring woods.

It was there that Maverick had met and become acquainted with them, and he had kept them in whisky, tobacco and grub for several days.

The villains soon got at their ease, for all that was needed was a couple of horns of liquor to make them that way.

They smoked and drank and finally got to playing cards.

Lame Jack had forgotten to take the money out of the till, and Holt helped himself to it.

He did this without the knowledge of the rest, and it was not until he showed some of it that they caught on.

"I thought yer only had nine dollars when we was over at ther ranch," said Maverick, looking at him sharply.

"That's all I did have. You gave me a dollar ter make ten, an' then I bet it an' lost it," was the reply.

"I knowed yer would lose it, too. That's where yer made a big mistake."

"Well, there ain't nothin' like bein' satisfied, is there? Now I'm satisfied that Young Wild West kin whip me. He done it so easy that I wasn't in ther fight at all."

"An' he made a nice lookin' sight of yer," spoke up Barley. "My, but you've got an awful face on yer, Holt!"

"Well, there ain't none of you galoots as could make it that way, anyhow," was the reply. "Not even Maverick could do it, though he might git ther best of me with a gun."

"We don't want ter think about quarrellin' or fightin' now, Holt," Maverick answered. "Now is ther time when we've got ter stick like leeches. We've gone an' done it. By breakin' inter this saloon an' helpin' ourselves we've violated ther law. But, come! I reckon you'd better divide up ther money yer took from ther till. Then we'll play poker till it gits daylight, an' then go ter look fur Young Wild West."

Holt laughed and pulled out the money he had stolen.

There was a little over a hundred dollars, and when he had divided it into six equal parts they were all satisfied.

"I didn't think that Lame Jack was fool enough ter leave that much money in ther drawer," said Maverick. "But it's all ther better fur us. Now we'll have a game of draw poker, boys."

They all agreed to this, and soon an interesting game was in progress.

The villains smoked and drank as they played, and it was not long before the liquor began to tell upon them.

One by one they dropped off to sleep, and with the cards lying on the table and upon the floor where they had fallen they slept on until daylight arrived.

Even then they did not awaken, and the sun arose and shed its golden rays through the windows.

The oil had burned out of the lamp long since, so there was nothing to attract the attention of any one passing the front of the building.

They were in that position when Young Wild West and his friends rode into the town.

The fresh hoof-prints led right to the saloon, and when our hero found that they had gone around to the rear of the building he dismounted and found the horses tied to the trees.

He motioned for his companions to remain silent, and then he peered through one of the windows.

There were the seven villains, some asleep in chairs and others lying at full length on the floor.

The young deadshot smiled grimly.

"I reckon this is one of the easiest round-ups that ever took place," he muttered.

Arietta came up and looked through the window at his side.

She saw and understood at a glance.

The rear door was open, so Wild told Charlie and Jim to go to the front and watch, while the cowboys were to remain at the rear door.

Then he called Arietta to follow him, and the two stepped softly inside.

The villains slept on, for their brains were deadened by the strong drink they had indulged in.

The two walked right through the room into the barroom.

Then Wild unbarred the front door and threw it open. Hop entered and promptly took his place behind the little bar.

"Allee ready for business!" he exclaimed, smiling in his bland and childish way. "Me no takee sometling, Misler Wild."

"See that you don't," was the reply.

Leaving him there, Wild went outside where the cowboys were in waiting.

Each stood with his rope ready.

"Boys," said he, "I want you to disarm the galoots, and then take them out one at a time. Make them keep perfectly quiet while you are doing it, too. I want Maverick Mike last."

"I'll take care of him!" Arietta spoke up, her eyes flashing.

"That's right, Et. I am going to let you fetch him out, providing things work the way I want them to."

When Charlie and Jim saw the cowboys inside taking the weapons from the sleeping men they came in by the rear door.

It was easier than Wild expected it would be.

Some of the men were carried outside without being aroused, and the others kept still when they found the muzzles of revolvers pressing against their heads.

In a short time all were out but Maverick Mike.

The villain lay stretched on the floor at full length, dead to the world.

Arietta was left to guard him, and she stood near him, a revolver in her hand.

Wild thought a moment and then he decided to tie the villains upon the backs of their own horses.

To make it easier he had two of them tied together on a horse.

Then lariats were fastened to them and given to the cowboys to hold.

This done, the three horses with their double burdens were led around to the front of the saloon.

A small crowd at once gathered.

There was nothing going on in the town that morning, so there were not very many around.

The day before had been a strenuous one, for Maverick Mike had been on his "high horse."

But now it was different.

An air of peaceful quiet pervaded the little town.

The citizens wanted to know all about it, of course, and Wild quickly explained to them.

When he told them that the six men had murdered and robbed a man on his way to the Straight Deal Ranch the night before they were for lynching them right away.

But he had a way about him that quickly made the men understand that they should let him have his say.

They gave in to him and waited to see what would happen.

The dashing young deadshot now walked into the saloon.

Hop was selling drinks and cigars and putting the money in the empty drawer.

As yet our friends did not know that the villains had robbed the place of anything save what they had smoked and drunk.

"Come, Et," said the boy coolly. "I reckon you had better wake up your man now. Just fetch him out the front way. There are a few spectators out there who would like to see Maverick Mike come forth a prisoner."

"They'll see it, then, Wild," was the reply. "I'll fetch him out, never fear."

The boy knew very well that she would, so he went on out and joined the waiting crowd.

Not knowing of a better way to rouse the villain, Arietta called out sharply to him and then fired a shot close to his ear.

The flash fairly burned his skin, and with a cry of surprise and fear he arose to a sitting posture.

"Get up and come with me," commanded the girl, her eyes flashing, though she was very cool, considering the circumstances.

"What!" exclaimed the villain, looking around the room in a dazed way. "What's ther matter, anyhow? Boys, where are yer?"

"Your friends are outside waiting for you," answered the girl. "I heard you wanted to kidnap me, so I came over to give you the chance. Get upon your feet, I say! If you don't I'll begin to shoot!"

Maverick felt for his gun.

It was gone!

Then he realized that it was all up with him.

"Let me go, gal," he said in a husky voice. "I ain't done nothin'."

"You will do something pretty quick if you don't march out to the front of the building. You'll die, Maverick Mike! I mean just what I say!"

"All right, gal. But, say, are you doin' this all alone?"

"You don't see any one else here, do you?" Arietta answered coolly.

The villain shook his head.

"Too much whisky," he said sadly. "Well, it's all right, I s'pose. I oughter have behaved myself."

Then he walked out into the barroom, followed by the brave girl, who kept her revolver pointed at his head.

"Hello, Mavelick Mike!" called out Hop sweetly. "Velly nicee morning, so be!"

"So ther heathen is tendin' bar, is he?" said the scoundrel, half to himself. "Well, I reckon things has took a mighty queer turn."

He felt in his pocket, as though he was going to buy a drink, but Arietta called out sharply:

"Keep right on moving!"

"All right, gal. You've got me dead ter rights. I'm goin' ter do jest as you say. But maybe I'll git out of this, an' then you look out!"

Wild heard the words and he came in.

"Let him sit down, Et," he said. "Come on out with me."

The boy had just got a confession from the prisoners, which was to the effect that they were cattle thieves, declaring that they had not done murder, as the Cowboy Buffer had said the night before.

"So you are nothing worse than cattle thieves, then?" he said as he came out with Arietta.

"That's all, Young Wild West," declared Barley, speaking very earnestly. "We're willin' ter be tried fur that an' take our medicine. But we ain't done no murder."

"All right. Boys, fetch them up close to the door."

As the captured cattle thieves were brought to the front of the tavern Maverick Mike came out to see what was going on.

Wild quickly dismounted, and with a rawhide whip in his hand ran to meet him.

Swish!

Down went the villain rolling in the dirt.

The young deadshot had mounted his horse just to make the scene more imposing to the man, and now he laid it on good and hard.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Arietta stood before the grovelling villain until he had received enough, all the while keeping her revolver pointed at him.

When Wild ceased she commanded him to rise to his feet.

Maverick Mike arose, looking like anything but a terrible bad man.

"Now you understand what is up, I guess," she said coolly. "You planned to kidnap me, and we planned to round you up. You see whose plans succeeded."

"Mercy!" gasped the scoundrel.

"You'll git mercy, I reckon," spoke up the scout, who had been itching to take a hand in the game. "Here comes ther judge, so they say."

Sure enough, the judge of the little town was coming.

Word had reached him of what had happened, and he was hastening to take charge of the prisoners.

Wild was very glad of this, for he did not want to be bothered with them any further.

He soon told the judge all he knew about them, and what they had done.

The result was that the seven villains were taken to the lock-up and a strong guard put over them.

This had just about happened when Lame Jack and his wife rode up in the buckboard, followed by several cowboys.

When they heard about the round-up of the scoundrels they all broke into a hearty cheer.

"So ther little gal took care of Maverick, did she?" said Lame Jack.

"And me all takee care of um saloon," chipped in Hop, who was in the act of pouring out a drink for himself.

"Well, by ginger! I've got a bartender, I see. Set 'em up fur all hands, Hop!"

"Allee light," replied the Chinaman, and he did so.

It was not long after that that the proprietor discovered that the till had been robbed.

Then the judge ordered the prisoners to be searched.

The money was found and Lame Jack was happy when he received it.

"I'll never leave money in ther till when I go away ag'in," he declared. "I don't care about ther rum an' ther cigars. That'll be my part toward ther roundin' up of their sneakin' skunks."

After he had been assured that there was no danger of the villains getting away, and that they would be taken to the county seat for a speedy trial, Wild and his friends set out for the ranch.

The spring round-up had not started yet, because there was too much excitement over what had happened.

But Ranchman Oaks and his wife and daughter were highly pleased at what had happened, and they insisted on speaking of the incident of the morning as "Arietta and the round-up."

The girl bore her honors modestly.

"I should not have taken any part in it, for they could have got along very well without me, if it had not been that the villains had planned to kidnap me," she said. "But I am glad I did, however, for it did me good to see Maverick Mike get his medicine."

"He ain't got what he deserves yet; but he will when a jedge an' jury hears ther case," declared the ranchman. "Well, since it has turned out all right, I reckon we oughter all be mighty happy. Now, if ther old woman hadn't chucked all that good whisky away last night we might do a little celebratin'."

"She no chuckee 'way," spoke up Hop smilingly. "Me allee samee catchee in um pail. Me gittee pleddy quickee."

"What!" cried Mrs. Oaks, her eyes widening. "You ketched ther whisky?"

"Lat light," was the reply; "me allee samee holdee um pail under um windee, and you allee samee chuckee um whisky light in um pail. Me allee samee velly muchee smartee Chinee."

"Well, I never!" declared the woman, surprised beyond measure.

Hop soon produced the whisky, and then the ranchman's

wife flounced away, no doubt satisfied that there was no use in trying to make a temperance man of her spouse.

But no one got tipsy, and the next day the round-up began—the round-up of the stock.

Wild and his partners assisted with it, and in three days it was accomplished.

They remained a couple of days at the ranch, and as they were about to leave the parson from Turner drove over, accompanied by his wife.

"I thought you would like to see us married," Frank Belter explained blushingly, "so I arranged to have the knot tied quietly this morning. We are going to Denver on a wedding trip, and Maggie's mother is going with us. Her father says he thinks he can get along for about three weeks."

"An' I promised ter not bring a drop of liquor in ther house in that time," added the ranchman. "I'm goin' ter keep ther promise, too."

There was nothing to do but to wait and see the wedding, so our friends did so.

It was a quiet affair, and few knew about it until after it had happened.

Later on, when they were down in Texas, Young Wild West and his friends learned that Maverick Mike and the six men he had cast his lot with were all hanged for the murder of the ranchman.

While Maverick had not taken part in it, he was adjudged guilty because of the company he kept.

There is a lesson in this. Keep out of bad company, and you are not likely to get into trouble.

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST CHASING THE MEXICANS; OR, THE 'HURRAH' AT HOT-HEAD HILL," which will be the next number (333) of "Wild West Weekly."

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SOME GOOD ARTICLES.

It is estimated by the Department of Agriculture that last year's crop was produced and garnered at a saving of \$685,000,000 over what would have been the cost of raising an equal crop fifty years ago. This saving was accomplished by the use of modern agricultural implements.

When in 1842 the United States troops finally came off victorious in their bloody seven years' war with the Seminoles, a portion of the tribe eluded capture and fled to the fastnesses of the Florida everglades, where they remained until the trouble had been partly forgotten by the whites. It is this remnant of the Seminole nation whose members now act as venders of souvenirs at Palm Beach.

In Abyssinia, where all game is considered the property of the Emperor, Menelik, zebra hunts are conducted on an enormous scale. One of Hagenbeck's travelers, hearing that one of these grand hunts was soon to come off, asked permission of the Emperor to take part in it and requested, furthermore, that he be allowed to take all the zebras captured to Hagenbeck in Hamburg. Both requests having been granted, the traveler joined the imperial hunting party, which included no less than 2,000 Abyssinian soldiers and a great number of villagers, pressed into service for the occasion. A vast piece of land was surrounded and the encircling lines of soldiers drawn gradually more and more closely together until finally a herd of zebras, caught between these lines, was driven to seek refuge in the bed of a river. Panic-stricken, the beasts threw themselves into the water from the high, rocky banks. At once these were occupied by some of the troops, while at a sign from the leaders over 1,000 men, with ropes in their hands, hurled themselves from the banks and swam into the very midst of the maddened zebra herd. After a few hours of terrific struggling in the water the herd was finally overpowered and captured—at a cost, however, of thirty-three human lives.

Preparations are now being made at the mints in Denver, San Francisco, and Philadelphia for the coinage of new five and two-and-a-half dollar gold pieces. These pieces will be quite novel in their appearance, as they are to be struck on an entirely different plan from any coin heretofore minted in this country. Last year while President Roosevelt was explaining to Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow, of Boston, the mechanical difficulties met with in the efforts to bring to success the gold coins of the St. Gaudens design, especially that referring to the commercial desire that the coins should "stack,"

or pile, to a uniform height, the idea came to Dr. Bigelow that a high or strong relief of design on a coin might be obtained by depressing the design below the field or face of the piece, instead of raising it above, as is done in all coinage operations. By this means the flat and uniform field would insure "stacking" coins to a height that would be uniform. In the present coinage the wear comes on the highest points of relief. In these the flat surface would take the wear and protect the relief. This system of countersinking a relief is claimed to be one of the oldest forms of Egyptian stone sculpture, but has been little used in modern times outside Japan, in which country it is restricted solely to wood-carving. It was never applied to coins until Dr. Bigelow undertook the experiment. The model, when presented to the President, and the practicability of this new idea in coinage, appealed so strongly to him it was at once decided that the experiment of making a coin on this principle should be tried. The design of a real Indian head with war-bonnet of feathers was adopted for the obverse side, and the President selected the design of an eagle, standing, for the reverse side. The new coins will bear the motto "In God We Trust," and will be made in such quantities as to afford everybody a coin who has the equivalent to exchange.

GRINS AND CHUCKLES.

Mrs. Gushington—Do you remember, colonel, the time you proposed to me, and I refused you? Colonel Courtly—Madam, it is the one moment of my life that I remember with the greatest pleasure.

Sunday-school Teacher—Did you ever forgive an enemy? Tommy Tuffnut—Onst. Sunday-school Teacher—And what noble sentiment prompted you to do it? Tommy Tuffnut—He wuz bigger'n me.

"Jane," began Mrs. Newliwed timidly, "I don't suppose—er—that you would—er—object to my getting an alarm clock?" "Not at all, ma'am," replied the sleepy maid. "Them things never disturb me at all."

Perkuson—I don't think animals have as much intelligence as many people give them credit for. Weigle—Neither do I. There was a time when I thought the gray mare that Histler drove was peculiarly intelligent because she stopped with him at every saloon; but the other day I changed my mind when I saw that the same amount of intelligence was displayed by Histler's new auto.

During a snowstorm in the Highlands the express was held up for an hour or two. The guard, a cheery Scot, with a pawky humor, passed along the carriages trying to cheer up the passengers. An old gentleman angrily complained that if the train didn't go on he would "die of cold." "Tak' my advice, and na' dae that," replied the guard. "Mind you, we chairege a shillin' a mile for corpses."

"Pa," said little Bobby, who had been allowed to sit up a little while after supper with the understanding that he was to ask no foolish questions, "can God do everything?" "Yes." "Can he make a two-foot rule with only one end to it?" "One more question like that," said his father, "and you will be packed off to bed." Bobby was silent for a few moments, and then asked: "Pa, can a camel go ten days without water?" "Yes, my son." "Well, how many days could he go if he had water?" The next thing Bobby knew he was in bed.

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